



NASHRAMH:

THE WHITE THREADS

*by DIANE & LISA BOTHELL
and SARAH COHEN*

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and Sarah Cohen**

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Nashramh: The White Threads
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First Edition

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To the memory of Sarah of Vienna
and all of those in long exile
who listen for the soundings of the Shofar.

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DIANE and LISA BOTHELL are mother and daughter and natives of Seattle, Washington. Diane, a former technical writer, is the driving force in promoting the development and writing of these wonderful tales. She is the author of the second of the 'Tales of the Nashramh', Rinim Poodor, published in 1986. Lisa, her daughter, was 18 years old, in 1984 and attending the University of Washington as a history major, when she wrote The Red Thread, and 19 when The Blue Thread was published.

SARAH COHEN, a longtime resident of Seattle, Washington, was the Marketing Manager for Three-Stones Publications Limited. Sarah is an experienced research analyst and has an extensive background in the foundations of Nashramh lore. She is the author of the first of the 'Tales of the Nashramh', Scoffing Marah, published in 1986.

The three authors, Diane, Lisa, and Sarah have teamed together to write this the fourth book derived from stories told to them by Diane's husband, Bruce Bothell, NASHRAMH: The White Threads.

FOREWORD

My name is Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor, the primary archivist for our Nashramh Sisterhood, and herein I offer you another glimpse of our ancient order through these historic tales about our coming of age, during the Post-Borgdragon era, after half a million years of continuous and uncertain growth.

This account is a continuation of The Gold Threads, which concluded with the retrieval of Neftalak B'Mesziah's gamma-complex and his judgment by our Necro-Classic Authority, on the outer rim, during NOAIM 9002-7N5, and the special Council Central meeting of JERIN 9433-7N5. As before, I am telling a number of intertwined tales which, as in the fabric of our sisterhood, are connected by more than circumstance and are about people you already know. The exception being Sahlie Lor, known herein as Solah-nim.

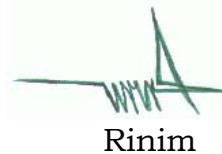
For those of you who aren't acquainted with our many tales, NASHRAMH: The White Threads is the fourth of the Nashramh set and is a continuation of The Red Thread, which is the story of Miriam, the elf-girl who reaches the highest order of the Nashramh Sisterhood - the Sister-Magum. The Blue Thread, is the story of Jenn, the child of innocence, who is drawn into the swirling course of events leading to the cataclysmic battle for mastery over the Starset Galaxy. The Gold Threads brings into focus the events following the terrible battles fought along the galaxy's outer rim and the frantic preparations of both the Nashramh Sisterhood and Ansharim Brotherhood to reconcile their differences and to form a new line of defense against the Black Legions of Adam Belial. NASHRAMH: The White Threads, concludes the epic story with a weaving together of both new and old themes. Beginning with a story of Telakin B'Mesziah, at the mortuary world of HaZevah, each chapter introduces new and often esoteric visions of a war that has

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no end and the effects that it has on the human condition. This, along with many answers to old questions, coupled with several new and deeply mystical anomalies, brings the reader to a sense of wonder and awe.

The terms and names used in this volume, such as the Sister-Magum, sub-binary, and many more were introduced in NASHRAMH: The Red Thread. It is recommended that you, the reader, consider reading The Red Thread, The Blue Thread, and The Gold Threads before diving into this book since the present story is predicated upon the reader's understanding of past events and the personalities who experienced them.

The writing style of this book is so designed as to keep a certain innocence and freshness, while dealing with some weighty matters. Thus, the use of some archaic terms and odd word and sentence constructions is not accidental. You, the reader will find this to be an unforgettable adventure and a story that you will not only think about, but will reread many times.



Chapter 1

HaZevah

There is a hidden place, a time, a circumstance, wherein each of us finds the truth of our being . . . a place wherein powers and agencies make themselves known and we come to know the unknowable.

The artificial world of MaHefcarban HaZevah was a man-made monument dedicated to the memory of 45,000,000,000 human souls lost in defense of our Starset Galaxy during the Great Conflagration . . . but it became more than its designers imagined . . . It became a mystical touchstone to the human soul . . . a place beyond time and space. . . .

09:22-15 SHIKIM 0980-8N5

BOOM! Tet-te-te-tet, Boom! Tet-te-te-tet, Boom! Tet-te-te-tet, Tet-te-te-tet, Tet-te-te-tet, Boom! Tet-te-te . . .

The booming sound of great military kettledrums and tapping cadence of snare drums filled the great hall of the primary mausoleum of the 'Web and Woof', and resounded off the polished grey and white marbled stone walls, enthraling the ranks of the 12,000 young Shekhinzalzah graduates. Within the ceremonial hall, a space stretching nearly two kilometers on each side and 200 meters high, the graduates approached in a reverent silence as the drums sounded their solemn beat.

BOOM! Tet-te-te-tet, Boom! Tet-te-te-tet Boom! Tet . . . the martial beat enveloped every fiber of Telly's body and senses as he marched in rank and file through the massive metal doors and into the Great Hall of Sacred Names. He and his unit were here to join with 12,000 other graduates of the Shekhinzalzah Training Center,

at O.T. Station III, to pay homage to all of the Ansharim and Nashramh casualties who paid the price for their galaxy's freedom from the invading forces of Adam Belial in the Great Conflagration.

This hallowed structure was only one of the giant mausoleums built on this mortuary world of 'MaHefcarban HaZevah', and known throughout all the G.C.C. civilizations simply as Sham-Zevah, or just HaZevah: The Cataclysm. This entire world was built into a memorial and cemetery for the more than 1,000,000,000 bodies of those men and women recovered from the sixth arm battle area where Belial's Legions of Light were stopped in their tracks. The majority of the casualties, more than 45,000,000,000, were reduced to atoms and only their individual gamma-complexes recovered, thus only their names appeared carved into the massive stone walls, both inside and out of each mausoleum, as a tribute to their ultimate sacrifice.

Sham-Zevah's three major continents and 20 island groups were completely landscaped with planned forests and natural ecological support areas that had been developed on the previously dead world by G.C.C. planetary engineers from all over the sixth arm Proctorate region. Vast tracts were covered by fantastic parks, measuring thousands of square kilometers, which surrounded each of 416,000 massive stone mausoleums located around the planet. Each park was crisscrossed with paved paths and spotted with thousands of fruit tree orchards. Long narrow trams ran underneath the main paths, in smooth-walled tunnels, to shuttle people from one point to another. The entire world was seeded with millions of varieties of insects, birds, fish, and animals to fill out and balance the ecological system. Sham-Zevah was a living and breathing place, devoted to the memory of the dead.

Every graduating class of G.C.C. naval and ground force personnel of all ranks was required to visit this shrine before assuming active duty. This was an expensive undertaking, but deemed necessary to instill a true sense of mission in the new generations of officers and enlisted personnel. The experience of seeing and reading the names of real human beings who fought against the invading enemy out on the rim was worth more to the graduates than all the lessons and indoctrinations they had heard throughout their short lives. The magnitude of this memorial world and its massive mausoleums was something no one could ever forget; especially the names.

Reading about the various actions that took place during the Great Conflagration in history recording crystals was nothing compared to this experience. Spoken words and visual combat sequences portrayed in scholarly presentations were powerful teaching tools, but when a newly commissioned recruit or officer visited this place, it became tangible, truly real as each graduate faced the names of people who actually fought and died out in the void. The long lists of names engraved on polished stone walls were only the beginning, for there were more dimensions hidden in this otherwise beautiful and stately setting than could be put into human speech; they appealed primarily to human emotions and inspirations. Here, each man and woman could feel the very presence of the past, if not in its actual physical dimensions, then in its hidden spirit. In a way, Sham-Zevah was both their link with themselves, past and present, and a touchstone to their future.

Each person visiting this vast memorial world was given the opportunity to visit mausoleums of his or her choice. Special care was taken to introduce newcomers to their own race's facilities, and to acquaint them with all the relevant facts about family or friends who had served and died in the Great Conflagration.

The Nashramh and Ansharim had jointly built this memorial building in an isolated park area set among low rolling hills and dense green forests. The marble building housed only the inscribed names of those lost during the conflagration. No mortal remains were ever brought here, and only the proper name of each individual was inscribed on the stone walls in Galactic Common. There were 382 women named 'Izel Nep' alone, with no rank or other designation to separate one from the other; only their individual names testified that they had died in battle out on the rim.

Now the resounding beat of military drums filled the stone memorial hall where new generations of defenders would swear their oath of fidelity to the preservation of civilization in the beautiful Starset Galaxy and vigilance against the black invaders from Samael's hidden empire. The immense ceremony, although simple, was totally overwhelming in its implications and served to impress on the participants' minds just how important each of their missions really was.

Soft light filtering through high crystal glass windows added to the awesome atmosphere of the beautiful ceremony as 10,000

grey-uniformed Ansharim and 2,000 black-uniformed Nashramh men and women stood at attention, speaking their sacred oaths in unison. The entire effect of this united ceremony was like being in a grand cathedral, as thousands of soft human voices echoed and resounded through its stone vaults as if in reverent prayer.

As Telly stood there, drinking in the magnitude of this most singular ceremony, he observed various faces in the assembled ranks facing him as they pledged allegiance. It occurred to him that many of these young men and women were incarnations of those very individuals whose names appeared engraved on these stone walls. Unlike most of them, he could remember his own past and the human beings with whom he'd shared it. In a way they were fortunate not to remember the details of their past lives, only to feel the weight of their hidden souls amplified in this mystical setting. Yes, they could feel themselves here, along with their long dead comrades, but herein they were protected by mortal shrouds. Contemplating those young faces, Telly envied them for their protective shrouds; they held so much promise for the future without the excess baggage of past disappointments cluttering up their aspirations and hopes.

Once the ceremony was over, each of the individual units marched outside in reverse order of their arrival and then were dismissed for 10 hours to visit their chosen sacred sites, or meditate privately about the nature of this most sacred of worlds.

Telly returned to the mausoleum to read some of the names of those Nashramh women who had given everything for both their sisterhood and their galaxy. He walked along the milky-colored stone and noted the long lists of names inscribed there. The seemingly endless numbers of names overwhelmed him; 'Mesgonerah, Listobay; 'Mesgonerah, Listocryth; 'Mesgonerah. . . .

There were mirror screens located strategically along the stone walls where individuals could enter the names of those dead sisters and brothers whom they wished to view. Short profiles of each individual were presented, using high-quality visual renditions of each person, including spoken statements that added a living dimension to the ancient recordings.

Halting at the next column of names, one inscription seemed to leap out at him; 'Mesziah, Jannanine'. His heart nearly stopped as he stared at the deeply carved letters. "My God," he exclaimed, "this is Jenn, my mother!"

He could sense Dove's amazement, in his inner mind, and the sudden realization that those whom she'd known long ago were also listed somewhere on this sacred world. There were many other names that Telly recalled from tales he'd been told while in school, many of whom were Sisters-Magum, but only Jenn was known to him personally.

He moved over to the nearest mirror screen and punched Jenn's name on the keyboard alongside it. Instantly, the screen lit up and the most beautiful elfin face appeared on it. She was dressed in the black uniform of a Nashramh naval lieutenant, although she appeared to be only a lovely child despite the military cut of her clothes. Jenn smiled and with a soft and tinkling voice spoke out of the ancient past.

"My name is Jennanine B'Mesziah and I am a Low Elf from a beautiful world that knows no war. I am married to a very wonderful man named Neftalak, and I have two lovely children by this marriage, Telakin and Myrnah to whom I commend this message."

The picture remained frozen for a short time, then faded out, leaving Telly shaken and speechless.

After standing there for a long time recalling his lost past, and all of the personalities who had peopled it, Telly agreed to Dove's urgings to search for the names of her own friends who should be listed in the Odomak mausoleum. Although he'd never met any of these ancient people, he knew each of them intimately through Dove's vivid memory. It was only after the two of them had become united in an eternal binary marriage, that he understood why Dove was so attached to the Pathfinder Corps. She, too, had been killed during the Great Conflagration and all of her family and friends were long dispersed or lost out in the void. She, like so many others, had nothing left but the camaraderie of the corps after so many centuries of having been lost. Now she had Telly and he had her forever . . . one day they would be joined by Neferah, whom they both loved in their individual ways.

Telly enjoyed the flight over to the Odomak Mausoleum, 90 kilometers away. The view was spectacular this spring afternoon as the sun shone down on the distant white stone structure when they approached. The well-planted orchards were in bloom and white blossoms promised a new crop of fruit that would weigh down their limbs in summer. The surface was perfectly landscaped

and the lawns were manicured and trimmed as if someone had just finished the job, although neither machinery nor evidence of living gardeners was visible. In the distance, there were deep green stands of evergreen trees and traces of lakes and winding streams. Everything was fresh and green, giving him a feeling of freedom and well-being.

Just ahead, a high crystal fountain shot cascades of gleaming water up into the gentle breeze, as they approached the front of the Odomak Mausoleum. His gaze took in the marble structure, manicured lawns, blooming fruit trees, and crystal fountain. It's like an aristocratic estate, he thought, rather than a memorial to the dead.

It took two hours for Telly to arrive at the Odomak mausoleum and another hour to find the 56th Pathfinder Company of the 221st Battle Group. There, he found Dove's name and those of all her fallen comrades.

Amuit, Maelan
Bokton, Robsen
Brinny, Alden
Coldon, Orin
Crawvold, Ebon
Drobit, Chan
Dugat, Jill
Eppet, Barboat
Gar, Marco
Gibbor, Trent
Heber, Lonton
Konissah, Dove

After studying each name and visualizing the living person, Telly sat down on a nearby bench and wearily buried his head in his hands.

Telly wasn't sure if he was crying for himself or for Dove. He felt the same pain and sense of loss that she did, and through her, he felt a kinship for these souls whom she'd known intimately. Dealing with his own memories and sense of loss was one thing, but it was compounded by experiencing Dove's private feelings. For this, he began to really understand her dedication and sense of loyalty to her comrades, and came to love her more than he knew was possible.

Memories flooded his mind and engulfed him as if the events and feelings were taking place all over again. Now he was experiencing Dove's final hours with her comrades so long ago, back in 6192-7N5.

* * *

09:10-22 MAREN 6192-7N5

A steady downpour of warm rain that lasted for hours pounded on the cool earth, creating a low smothering mist which hung over the dark mud of the power plant's outer perimeter. The total effect clouded her vision as she crawled slowly toward the rim fence and searched for any sign of enemy activity. Mendot and Crawvold were two meters to her left, and Barb and Trent were to her right. Captain Heber and Jill were six meters ahead and serving as point, while Lieutenant Romer and the others were bringing up the rear elements of their party. There were 30 pathfinders and 14 technicians in her group. Their mission was to penetrate the Feldmorkem transmitter complex, and hold it until the technicians located and removed the enemy's code crystals, sapped their power station's control banks, then planted a thermal mine near the primary reactor chamber. Getting the technicians and their captured data crystals out alive would be another problem.

The rain continued to pour as the small raiding party crawled through the sticky mud and slowly approached the high wire fence serving as the outer perimeter to a well-designed mine field. Jill was their best sapper, and she soon penetrated the fence without setting off any alarms. Then she moved forward in a zigzagging pattern, crawling about three meters in each direction, and located all of the buried sensor-mines in her way. Captain Heber crawled alongside Jill and handed her the special non-metallic tools of her trade, along with neutralizing by-passes, as she unearthed each mine. The two worked together slowly as they located, dug up, neutralized, and reburied each mine. They placed markers indicating where the others were to pass as they followed through the mine field, and after four hours, had traversed the 20 meters to the barrier wall. Dove and her half-squad remained at the breach in the wire fence to cover them.

Lying there, soaking in the wet mud, Dove tried to see every detail in the immediate area, and to anticipate where the enemy's

patrols would approach them. She noted that both Jill and Captain Heber were barely visible, and there were no trails in the mud behind them. The steady downpour caused the dark mud to puddle, then to level out as if no one had ever been there. This was one of the good features of this rain-soaked continent, besides the obvious limitations on visibility and scrambling of infrared heat detectors. Operating ground support aircraft was impossible for both the raiders and the enemy alike, so all activities took place on the ground. The temperature of the rain was almost the same as their outer garments and face masks. The primary drawback was that everyone was soaked to the skin, and movement through the thick mud was sluggish at best; even when attempting to run upright. Their mud-soaked camouflage uniforms blended in perfectly with the terrain, and could be spotted only if they made sudden movements.

Half an hour after reaching the barrier wall, Captain Heber and Jill had bored a man-sized hole through the two meter-thick reinforced concrete. They used a low-frequency sonic cutter that, although dangerous to use around alarm devices, was small, fast and not nullified by the dampening effects of excessive moisture. Once the breach was made, the two crawled through without looking back. Dove signaled to Lieutenant Romer, who was behind her, to move on in while she and her half-squad remained as a rear guard. One by one, the pathfinders and technicians crawled by and then disappeared through the dark breach hole in the concrete wall.

As the last pathfinder disappeared into the grey hole, Dove motioned to her four flankers to move on, as she waited to follow them in last. Then, after securing the opening in the wire fence and crawling 20 meters through the neutralized path in the mine field, she wriggled through the coarse hole into the dark chamber beyond. Once inside, she turned and moved part way back into the hole and covered the outer part of the opening with a piece of mud-soaked plasti-nap, to camouflage it from enemy patrols. It surprised everyone that they'd missed the enemy. Their battle plan provided for an early fire fight, and an alternate entry route in case of discovery. Thus far, surprise seemed to be on their side, but nothing would surprise Dove or any of the others. The enemy was neither stupid nor lax in their security and defensive systems. There could be some deadly traps lying ahead.

Inside, it was darker than Sargon's hell, and only the occasional blinking of an infrared mini-light indicated the direction the main party had taken. Moving silently was almost impossible. Everyone was soaking wet and encrusted with slimy mud that made sucking sounds as they wound their way through the unlit pipe tunnels towards their primary objective, the secondary control center. Intelligence analysis and special infiltrator reports gave them a good idea of the interior layout of this facility, and thus far, everything had gone according to plan.

Upon entering the structure, the raiding party moved to their right, along the inner face of the wall to a narrow tunnel that conducted steam and various liquid bearing pipe-runs through the lower part of the building. After 200 meters, they turned left into the third branch tunnel, and continued moving deeper into the enemy complex. They had gone about 50 meters when they arrived at the powerhouse's sub-transformer room. Until now, they hadn't encountered enemy technicians or roving security forces, but now everything began to heat up.

Captain Heber stopped just short of the tunnel opening and directed several pathfinders into the brightly lit room, and to move around the group of technicians before opening fire. Behind the cover of huge electrical transformers and various types of auxiliary equipment, they entered undetected. Everything worked well until they fired their first round, then automatic alarms sounded in response. The enemy guards and technicians were cut down without any problem. But within minutes, armed security forces converged on the strike zone and nearly succeeded in stopping the pathfinders. Only the raiders' speed and determination, and their accurate knowledge of the power plant made the difference, but not without a high price. Six pathfinders and four technicians were killed in the first five minutes of the fight, while the rest raced for the secondary control center, only 20 meters away. Four pathfinders remained in the tunnel leading to the outer wall, and kept out of sight. They would guard the escape route from the transformer room until the raiders returned. Fortunately the enemy hadn't thought of this tactic and didn't look there.

The enemy kept in hot pursuit of the infiltrators who fought doggedly in the narrow corridor leading to the control room. Once there, the raiders were met by 90 well-armed troopers. Captain

Heber was shot in the chest while moving up to the end of the corridor, and dropped to his knees.

"Give me the satchel," he croaked to Drobot, the lead scout, "and prime it. My right arm isn't working."

Drobot removed the satchel charge and primed it with expert motions. "You sure you don't want me to deliver it, boss?"

"No. I'm done for," Captain Heber gasped, "I'll get it in there. Now give me cover fire."

Drobot nodded to Jill, who signaled for cover fire. The leading elements of the enemy defenders would be most likely to cut the captain down before he could make it very far.

Captain Heber waited a few moments as concentrated fire from rifles and high-impact projectiles shot into the control center, tearing up everything in front of them. Then, with a sudden burst of energy, he leaped to his feet and bound out, straight through his own cover fire, and made for the middle of the large room. He only got 12 meters before being cut down by the defenders, but too late for them to save themselves. As he slid along the polished floor, the satchel charge detonated. The blast was so intense that it completely stunned the defenders and broke a few eardrums in the process. The pathfinders were prepared for just this kind of situation. They fanned out and killed the prostrate enemy troopers, and then secured the other entrances before reinforcements could arrive.

The 11 remaining technicians started work before the last of the enemy soldiers were killed, and began locating the precious code crystals and removing them from their booby-trapped enclosures. One of the technicians was killed and two were wounded when a hidden trap exploded in their faces; otherwise, their work went smoothly.

This wasn't the primary control room for the transmitter station, but only a backup facility that had duplicate crystals in case of emergency. Thus, the room wasn't as well-situated for defense as the primary facility in the main transmission building. It was a flaw in the enemy's defense plan. Although the power plant was heavily defended, the secondary control room wasn't, since it served as an auxiliary function in the complex facility. The technicians completed their jobs within 20 minutes, and the sappers were just finishing the arming sequence on the thermal mine they'd hidden under the metal decking. The detonator was

activated by two triggering mechanisms; one was set on a timer, while the other was tripped by the slightest movement.

Dove pressed back against the tunnel wall as bursts of high-impact projectiles, mixed with laser beams, shot past her. Pipes along the tunnel burst open as exploding projectiles hit them, sending out streams of corrosive liquids and jets of high-pressure steam. Visibility was reduced to nearly zero, and the pathfinders were forced to either crawl along the grated deck, or edge along, pressed against the wall opposite the cable and pipe racks. Everyone maintained strict silence during their drive down the passage, only speaking softly into their combat comm-links when necessary to give warnings or instructions. Those who were hit by enemy fire or the deadly emissions from ruptured pipes clenched their teeth and kept quiet. Thus the enemy didn't know what effect he was having on the raiders. No one fired their weapons unless they had an enemy in sight, which was impossible in the steam-filled air. As bad as the situation seemed, the enemy, who couldn't see them either, weren't sure there was anyone actually in the tunnel. It wasn't until the lead units slipped out under cover of the billowing steam, and opened fire on them in the transformer room, that the enemy troopers knew exactly who they were facing. By then it was too late, since a satchel charge was thrown in before the pathfinders entered, and caused enough damage to the defenders to hinder their normally superior fighting abilities. The pathfinders were careful in directing their fire confusing the troopers as well as affecting a deadly toll on them.

"Obolak four," Truant's deep whisper came over her earphones. "Chuam-mu doz-frok two." Literally the abbreviated battle language stated that there was an opening in the enemy ranks that the lead elements of pathfinders had established, and that the party was to move at top speed to the number two tunnel, which led to the outer wall. There were four pathfinders, who had remained behind, still holding the tunnel for their escape.

"Comp owit-nor tran. Jou-tro mot," Dove whispered. "Maintain radio silence from here on. They may have our frequency."

Dove encountered a large number of bodies along the way, and carefully checked each one to discover if the person was still alive. There were enemy and pathfinder bodies, mostly enemy troopers, and all were dead. She came up to Jill at the mouth of the tunnel and saw that her arm was torn open with the bone sticking out.

Jill motioned her to keep moving, as she stayed in place to give cover fire, and care for her wound when she could. Crawvold and Merot were somewhere ahead, and Barb was just behind her. Trent was out of sight, possibly still back in the tunnel.

Movement through the deep mud was a nightmare, although the steady downpour did obstruct the pursuing enemy troopers' vision, and he couldn't move any faster than the pathfinders. Dove could hear the muffled sound of racing engines, as the enemy's tracked vehicles ground through the mud, making no faster time than they did, since the course was now up a long grade and the slimy surface made it impossible for the vehicles to get any traction. Dove nearly stumbled over Trent, who was trying to help Jill, now in near shock. Trent had helped her along from the transformer room, and now she was giving out. Her broken arm had an emergency plasti-cast on it, although she was still losing blood.

"Can she make it?" Dove whispered hoarsely.

"No. She's done for. But I don't want to leave her here. Help me move her to the swamp grove we passed when we came in. Maybe she can hold out for there for awhile."

"Yeah. Maybe we can set up an ambush there and slow these bastards down. Otherwise, our techs won't be getting out of here."

Barb slogged over, and Dove motioned for her to take Jill's feet while she and Trent picked her up with their arms interlocked under her back and torso. Mardot, Fouewar and Nort came up behind them and provided armed protection against the enemy's lead elements.

"How many we got left, Dove?" Nort huffed.

"I don't know, but we'll take a headcount when we get to the swamp grove. You go ahead, on the double, Nort, and get our people to set up an ambush at the edge of the grove. We have to get together without disclosing our moves over the comm-links. I think they have our frequency."

"Got you," he responded and started to move forward as fast as he could.

The three carried Jill, who was nearly unconscious, into the dense foliage of the swamp grove and set her down with her back leaning against a Targo trunk. If they laid her down on the murky ground, she could easily drown in the puddles of water. Dove fumbled in her med-kit for a Col-Den 'R' syringe, snapping off the

needle cover and injecting two units into Jill's right forearm. In the meantime, Trent tore her sleeve open and wound a thin plastic strap around her upper arm. Now he loosened the strap steadily as the Col-Den-R slowly entered her blood stream. No color returned to her ashen face, but Jill's eyes responded to the synthetic stimulant.

"Take it slow, Jill," Trent murmured, "we aren't going anywhere for awhile, so take it slow."

"Did we . . . get . . ." her voice came out weakly, "all the techs?"

"Yeah, Most of them, Lieutenant Romer has charge of them," Dove informed her, noting the seven remaining technicians preparing to add supporting fire when the enemy troops arrived. "We should be in a fire fight in a few minutes, but we want you to stay put for now. Do you understand? Stay put for now."

"I under . . . stand . . ." Jill mumbled. "I. . . ."

"Don't talk. Just stay and wait."

Dim shadows of advancing enemy troopers began to appear out of the dense mist and pouring rain. It was nearly impossible to determine their numbers, since visibility was poor, but this also served to camouflage the raiding party. The last headcount disclosed there were 14 pathfinders and seven technicians left. Four pathfinders and one technician were too badly wounded to go further. It was determined that Lieutenant Romer would take four pathfinders and the six technicians to their pick-up point, while Dove's half-squad served as rearguard along with the wounded. Hopefully, they'd delay the enemy long enough to get the technicians and their valuable cargo out of the area. Everyone was strung out in a skirmish line, including the wounded, except for Jill and Amuit, who were unconscious. They waited silently to hit the enemy with everything they had, then as soon as the initial exchange had been launched, Romer's people would disengage and make a break for it. Dove and her people would then continue to engage the enemy and keep them tied down as long as possible.

Everyone held their fire until the enemy troopers were within 10 meters of their position, then opened up with everything they had. Mardot, Barb, and Sodwick directed their long-range impact missiles back beyond the frontline of enemy troops, while the others directed their rifle and missile fire against all visible targets. Enemy soldiers, who were struggling through the thick mud, were caught out in the open and were cut down before they had a

chance to fire at the raiders. Crawvold, Trent, Coldon and Marco acted as executioners, picking off all wounded and downed enemy troops in view with high-impact rifle fire. The others continued to fire into the enemy's rear ranks, which were out of sight, with impact projectiles and rifles.

After the enemy's return fire diminished, Lieutenant Romer signaled to his people, and they withdrew to make a break for it. Dove's half-squad and the wounded who could still fight, continued to fire into the enemy positions, making it appear they still had a large force holed up in the swamp grove.

Listening carefully to the enemy's communications, Dove knew they felt they had the raiders trapped in the swamp grove, and were calling in reinforcements to capture them. Apparently their ruse worked for the moment, and Lieutenant Romer's people had escaped undetected. Now the problem was to hold on as long as possible.

Dove moved along the line and made sure each individual had a grenade with a lever handle handy, with the pin pulled. If they were badly wounded, or killed, the grenade would go off when their body was moved. She went to Jill and Amuit and made sure they were booby-trapped too. Both were now conscious, but unable to fight.

Dove hadn't noticed before, but everyone's uniforms were burned and discolored from corrosive chemicals released from ruptured pipes back in the power plant. Her own legs and lower abdomen were aflame with raw burns she'd ignored in the heat of battle and during the long trek to the swamp grove. Her entire body was aching and battered even before entering the power station; now it was a wreck. She wondered to herself how she or any of the others had made it this far, especially through the thick mud. She was badly cut and burned in so many places that it wasn't worth the effort to tend to her wounds. She would be dead shortly anyway, and she wanted to devote all her efforts to combating the advancing enemy.

Revving engines and muffled clanking of metal from out of the rain-soaked mists announced that reinforcements were beginning to arrive in force. Only the steady downpour and low-hanging mist made visibility impossible beyond 10 or 15 meters, disguising the enemy's numbers and dispositions. Apparently, the pathfinders had decimated the initial pursuit company that was trailing them.

Now the radio waves were busy with the enemy's frontline communications. Dove couldn't understand much of their battle language, but from the sheer volume of radio traffic, it was apparent that their ruse had worked for the moment. The question now was whether the G.C.C. lighter would be there to pick up Lieutenant Romer and his technicians.

The new enemy troopers had better weapons than the original company, which had only had laser rifles and grenade launchers. Now there were armored vehicles supporting the ground troops, armed with long-range impact projectiles and other deadly weapons. The air was filled with sharp explosions from large-caliber ordnance and impact projectiles. Within moments, everyone had been pierced by shards of hot metal and steel pellets. In addition, the enemy was using flaschette ammunition which tore everything to shreds.

To Dove's left, Crawvold fired carefully aimed rounds at the source of the enemy concentrations; then something hit him in the face, exploding his head in a plume of red spray. One after the other, the pathfinders were torn to pieces by explosive projectiles and flaschettes. A sharp detonation from above sent sizzling pain down Dove's right side and across her legs, and the burning pain was so intense that she nearly cried out. Dove clenched her teeth instead and fired two rounds at an advancing trooper. Her second round knocked him down and he rolled over and fired back at her, kicking up mud directly in front of her face. Her third round finally killed him. All she could detect from her position was that, besides her, only two other pathfinders were still in action.

A bright white flash lit up the sky behind the advancing enemy, and Dove buried her head in the mud under her arms to protect herself from the blast effects of the nuclear explosion. She estimated that the detonation was only 15 kilometers away.

The blast knocked the advancing troops down, wounding and killing many because they were caught out in the open. They didn't know about the thermal mine hidden in the power plant, and had made no preparations in their attack strategy to account for such a blast. Within a short time, of which Dove had no concept, the ground began to dry out and everything was shrouded in a strange glowing light. As she raised her head to get her bearings, an enemy trooper loomed over her with a fixed bayonet on his rifle. She rolled to the side, releasing the trip mechanism on the grenade hidden

under her body. For some odd reason she didn't feel anything, but heard a man's voice screaming so loudly that it made her want to cover her ears. Her vision cleared and the enemy trooper lay in front of her, his legs shredded and bleeding. His mouth was wide open and he was bawling out in agonized screams that he couldn't control.

Dove stood up and wished she could do something to help the poor creature, who was in agony. Killing an attacking enemy was one thing, but standing there helplessly watching him writhe in pain was another. The sight really upset her.

After awhile, the wounded man stopped screaming. Then, after sobbing to himself for a short time and shaking with pain, he finally stopped. Pausing for a moment, he got up, looked at Dove, then turned and slowly walked away. The fight was over for the two of them and he wanted nothing to do with her. Dove remained there for awhile, staring idly at her torn and twisted body that lay dead at her feet in the now dry and crusted earth. That was her . . . or it had been her. She didn't hurt anymore; in fact, she couldn't feel much of anything. She stood there for a time, trying to figure things out . . . to make some sense out of everything that was happening. The dead trooper was sprawled next to her body with his mouth and blue eyes still open, still looking as if he were alive. The rain clouds had dissipated for the time being, due to the nuclear explosion, and the area was considerably lighter and visibility extended for at least two kilometers.

After a time, Dove walked over to Crawvold, who was standing with Jill, Mardot, Barb and Trent. Jill was alert now and up on her feet, though her arm still had that bloody wound. She didn't seem to notice it, so Dove chose to ignore it too. They nodded to her as she approached, and Barb gestured toward the field strewn with corpses.

"We'd better start looking for our people, Dove. We don't want anyone to get lost out here."

"Yeah," Dove replied, thinking aloud, "don't they know we're all dead?" She stood there for a few moments and wondered how it was that they could see and hear each other. She felt as if she was still alive, yet something was discretely different. This must be what death was like, and the others hadn't realized it yet. Whatever the case, she knew they had to collect their comrades before anyone got lost.

Time seemed to lose all meaning as the technician and nine pathfinders began to systematically search for their fallen comrades. There were small groups of worn grey-looking enemy troops forming into a ragtag line that seemed to be walking slowly to the east. Where the grey figures were going, Dove couldn't guess, but in all events, they ignored the pathfinders completely. She didn't know how long it took, but they finally located all 44 members of their raiding party.

Captain Heber and Lieutenant Romer took command and determined the group should stay in the immediate area, moving from one location to another each day as if they were on regular maneuvers. It seemed to be important that they maintain a regular schedule and operate as if nothing had changed. Actually, nothing had really changed and that was the odd part of the whole thing. They didn't have corporeal bodies now, but it didn't make a difference to their way of conducting themselves. It was apparent they'd failed to deliver the code crystals to G.C.C. intelligence authorities, and only succeeded in destroying the enemy transmitter complex. Now they were alone on an alien planet with no chance for rescue, so they did what they knew best; they evaded the enemy and kept on the move.

Time meant nothing now, since it no longer existed for them. The pathfinders moved endlessly from place to place as they were trained to do; waiting for they knew not what.

The compulsion was odd, and it was Captain Heber who first noticed it. Originally, he thought it was the sound of a military trumpet calling the troops in from maneuvers; he wasn't sure, but it seemed to call out three times. Everyone else began to sense the calling signal that drew them like a magnet, and they started to walk to the northwest towards the old swamp grove where they'd made their last stand. It was raining heavily and the muddy ground was covered by a low mist as they trudged along.

Three figures crouched in the dense foliage ahead of them, and it seemed to Dove that they were women, but she didn't know why. All three were dressed in deep green uniforms and face masks soaked with mud. One was operating some sort of device that no one recognized. She was looking intently into a dimly lit screen and moving her right hand in an odd manner. Something in the back of Dove's mind told her this was what they'd been waiting for. How she knew this, she didn't understand, but she knew only that it

was. As the pathfinders and technicians approached the three figures, Dove could see their eyes which were hard as steel. She hadn't the slightest idea of who these people were, but continued to walk slowly toward them, and then everything went black.

The soft-eyed old woman sat behind a wooden table, her fragile-appearing hands folded together on the table top in front of her, and looked right into Dove as if she were an open book.

"Who are you?" the old woman asked in a strange whispering voice.

Dove stood at attention and determined to remain silent until she knew just who this creature was. Then, without knowing why, she answered.

"Konissah, Dove, Corporal I, Pathfinder, serial number 76P214768890P."

The woman's strange, soft eyes continued probing her, and Dove felt spooked by them. Whatever this creature was, she scared the hell out of her and made her feel giddy. She felt that she shouldn't be talking to this strange woman, that only her name, rank and serial number were required for prisoners of war, but an overriding compulsion made her say more. Those softly glowing lavender eyes compelled her to respond honestly to every question and she was powerless to resist.

"You are now the ward of the Binary-Plane Triad Graves Registration and Necro-Classic Authority for the Ansharim, Nashramh, and Consortium of Advanced Starset Galactic Governments. You will be debriefed and judged as provided by. . . ."

"God, Telly, I couldn't figure out who the hell she was and what it was she said. Everything got all mixed up after that, although I remember seeing Jill and Craw. . . ."

"AGENT B'MESZIAH . . . AGENT B'MESZIAH"

* * *

"Agent B'Meszhiah, you are requested to report to your transport lighter," the thin transparent-looking old man spoke softly. "Please come with me."

Telly looked up suddenly, then, checked his wristwatch. It was 21:24 hours. "My god, I must have been. . . ."

"Don't concern yourself, young man. It's quite common here at Sham-Zevah whether you're a new person, or an old one. Everyone

who comes here is affected in some mystical way, even the black ones."

"Oh?" Telly turned, as they walked to a waiting car outside. "Are there many of them able to infiltrate here?" He hadn't thought about it before, but since the black ones were able to infiltrate elsewhere, then why not here?

"Of course there are, but we have no difficulty discovering them. As I said, this place has a mystical affect on everyone who comes here. With them, it is easily identifiable."

A spring rain was now falling and everything was being covered by a low mist through which the muted colors of flower beds could be seen. This soft and enchanting vision added to the effect of Telly and Dove's feelings and made this place even more important to their sense of commitment.

Telly walked silently with the transparent-looking man, and thought about his experience at the enemy power plant. Well, not exactly his, but Dove's.

"Well, I guess we really are one person," he thought to himself.

"Yes, I guess we really are," Dove's voice sounded in his inner mind.

Telly turned to look for the transparent-looking man who'd been walking next to him, and suddenly realized he was no longer there. That was certainly strange, but then this entire world wasn't exactly designed to meet conventional norms, so why should its inhabitants? He turned and strode along a wet and shimmering cobblestone walkway, toward the car.

"Yes, this certainly has been an eventful day . . . all the way around, Dove. Now I know we're part of something a great deal more complex and important than we ever dreamed of. We've got a lot to think about."

Chapter 2

Incident

There are many secret revelations made to us which govern our destinies, even if we don't recognize them for their true value. Some of our sisters are specially marked for advancement and demanding responsibilities from the beginning of their careers . . . especially in our rim fleet. Herein they become privy to more than just military matters.

Sister-Captain Neferah 'Tziah is one of our cases in point, and I dare say, a good one. Born of an ancient warrior race and brought into our sisterhood as a child, Neferah proved her fighting and command qualities time and again. Her proven loyalty and readiness to attempt the impossible made her privy to our deepest secrets early in her naval career . . . but her assignment to rescue a sister on Uloto-Mon disclosed far more than she realized.

19:00-28 MAREN 0999-8N5

Sister-Commander Tarno Ibroe, a broad-shouldered woman with long blue-grey hair and lavender eyes, sat back in her high-backed executive chair examining a thin document on her desk as the door opened. Neferah didn't like the looks of the woman at first glance, and knew the damned bureaucrat was bad news from the moment she opened her oversized mouth. This lavender-eyed crowd was a sisterhood unto themselves, and only spoke to mere mortals when there was something obscure and dangerous in the works. They never gave anyone the facts, only vague hints, then, they wanted positive actions as a result of their lack of direction.

"We'll only be a few minutes, Captain," she spoke soothingly, saluting Neferah as she entered the room. "You needn't bother to sit down."

Neferah walked over to the desk in casual measured strides, much in the cocksure manner of pathfinder officers, and returned the woman's left-handed salute in an arrogant slow motion.

"Well, what's so damned important that I've got to leave my ship before taking on ordnance?" Neferah shot out. "Can't you idiots wait until we're secured and battle ready before bothering me with trivia? Believe me, I've got better things to do than hang around here and play little bureaucratic games with you. So what do you want?"

"As I said, Captain B'Tziah, this won't take very long," Commander Ibroe continued, ignoring Neferah's usual ugly mood and bad manners. "The project you are about to embark on is of utmost importance to our sisterhood. This necro-survival chip is of special manufacture, and you will be entrusted with it during your portion of this task."

She handed the tiny red chip to Neferah and instructed her to place it on her left upper wisdom tooth. As Neferah complied, Ibroe leaned back and studied the slender and youthful appearing warship captain for a long moment. Then, without showing any emotion, she continued. "You'll return to your ship and leave port immediately upon boarding. Commander Orr, your security chief, will have orders waiting for you. As to your crew members, who are ashore, they're being rounded up now and returned to your vessel. That is all, Captain," she saluted formally.

Returning the salute insultingly, Neferah turned on her heel and marched out of the office without further comment. "Why in hell did that numbskull call me clear across this damned base just to give me that?" she thought to herself, "God, what a bunch of nitwits. Haven't they ever heard of messengers?"

"Sister-Engineer Rodann Noch, please come with us," the short, squat security sister spoke softly. "Your leave's canceled, so please come with us."

"Hey! Blow it out your nose, pudgy!" Rodann glared, removing her hand from her male consort's open fly. "I don't know you two birds, so beat it!"

Rodann had already consumed a full liter of Grey-Oamon spiked with spice and high-proof alcohol, making her judgment a bit more than impaired.

"Please come with us, Sister Noch," the woman repeated, stepping up to the cocktail table.

Without warning, Rodann ducked around the table, knocking it aside, and lunged at the grey-uniformed woman, driving her steel-hard fist straight for her solar plexus.

The woman turned slightly, fending off the terrible blow, and smashed her own gloved fist into Rodann's clenched teeth, knocking her back into her cushioned chair. Rodann's head was spinning as she rolled and came back at her assailant with a fresh attack. Then it was all over as the security woman's neuronic whip caught Rodann on the side of her neck, dropping her like a rock.

"Don't move a muscle, young man," the second security woman warned Brad Homewot, as he started to rise to his feet. "You don't want to be stuck in the brig for messing with us, do you?"

Brad sat down as quickly as he'd risen. Suddenly these two grey-uniformed women seemed to be a hell of a lot bigger than before, and there was no question they'd go all the way if a fight started.

"What the hell did she do to you?" the well-muscled navy machinist spat out. "We were minding our own business and weren't breaking any laws. . . ."

"And let's keep it that way. This is an in-house problem, young man. Don't worry, Rodann will get some new teeth and be back with you when we're done with her. It's just an in-house problem. You know."

When Neferah stormed through the SD Qualo-Tae's outer airlock, she was met by Sister-Commander Croamer Orr, who blocked her way.

"Slow down, Captain. We've got our security identification procedures, you know. We wouldn't want any nasty little imposters getting aboard and trying to impersonate your charming manners, would we?"

"Funny, you. . . ."

"Temper, temper, Captain, we want to make this fast, don't we?"

"Okay, Orr. Get on with it. Where's the rest of my crew?"

"Those who were on duty are all on station, Captain. The 15 who were ashore are either in our sick bay or in our brig. We're ready to go as soon as you register as our true and loving Captain. Now, let's have a look at those lovely black eyes of yours."

The eight month voyage to the outer rim was tense and everyone expected to be set upon by the enemy at any time. The Qualo-Tae had only 42 Magna-Therm torpedoes and 16 Magna-Therm mines in her ordnance racks, hardly enough to defend herself against a conventional enemy, much less a black raider. Neferah never left the bridge for more than an hour. Otherwise she spent short periods of time cat-napping or cleaning up in her cabin. The rest of her crew worked efficiently to ensure that nothing would go awry with their operational systems at the wrong time. Preventive maintenance, always a top priority, became almost a religion with the technicians. Only one thing was worse than a shortage of ordnance while in hostile space, and that was a system failure.

* * *

Only the regular purring of life-support machinery and the soft beat of impulse maneuvering motors broke the silence in the otherwise quiet craft, as 11 passengers sat strapped in their seats. The planetary lighter was small, measuring only 35 meters in diameter, and 12 meters-high at the center. Its five crew members were located in a closed cabin, just above the passenger compartment, and nothing could be heard of their communications with their mother ship, a Nashramh Class II scout freighter named the 'SF Mee Amod-Tae'. A large viewscreen, mounted on one of the bulkheads, showed the Mee Amod receding in the distance as the lighter moved away toward its destination on the primitive planet of 'Uloto-Mon' below.

Sister-Captain Neferah B'Tziah, commander of the Nashramh scout destroyer 'SD Qualo-Tae', was assigned to a special mission that, if all went well, would take only a few hours to complete. In the meantime, the Qualo-Tae was moored in one of the scout freighter's cargo bays awaiting her return. Neferah was assigned to accompany a team of G.C.C. pathfinders to a large town in a jungle clearing, to rescue a marooned Nashramh Sister, being held captive by primitive natives. Intelligence analysts, aided by three cultural infiltrators assigned to the area, pinpointed the sister's

exact location, and chose Neferah to expedite the rescue for three reasons. First, the Nashramh's infiltrators couldn't, because of their unique positions, make a rescue. Second, Neferah resembled the local natives enough to pass for one, provided she didn't get too close to them. Third, she would recognize the sister whom she was to rescue. Apparently, they'd been old acquaintances and there would be no mistake in identity. The marooned sister, who was reported to have a broken neck and totally paralyzed, was being kept in a cage in a freak show of a traveling carnival.

Neferah was to be dressed in a scanty and revealing native woman's costume, and would be escorted by the pathfinder team to the outskirts of the town, where the carnival was now entertaining, and make the rescue. She'd studied cultural source materials supplied by the intelligence people, and was sure she could fit in, at least for a short period. She'd learned enough of the language to get by, but didn't intend to get into any philosophical discussions with the natives. At best, she'd kill any who got in her way. Talk was cheap, action was what counted. This was no picnic, and she wanted to get on with the rescue, and then get the hell out of there.

Her costume, which one of the pathfinders had stored in a knapsack, consisted of a short skirt slit up the side, an open red blouse that revealed everything, a thin leather belt, and light leather slippers. She would have no underwear, and had to appear sexy and provocative, while not promiscuous. The women in the area, especially those of the upper classes, were accustomed to this strange mode of dress and conduct. For some reason it made their men feel more virile and manly to have their wives and daughters flaunt their physical virtues to others who couldn't partake of them.

She smiled to herself and thought about what her officers and crew would think if they saw her dolled up like a little hooker. Then, it would be great if Kin were to see her. He'd probably want to hump her on the spot. The idea of Telakin seeing her and becoming enamored was a tantalizing prospect. God, she wished he was here with her.

Neferah stood ready to disembark from the cloaked planetary lighter as soon as it touched the ground, and follow the first pathfinders out into the dense jungle. It was dark outside, and nothing could be seen from the airlock's viewscreen except the

vague outlines of thick tangled treetops that were so intertwined there didn't appear to be a break in them anywhere. Then, without any trace of motion, the lighter hovered for a moment, and dropped to a clearing below.

The outer airlock swung open. Four pathfinders quickly disappeared into the dark to provide armed protection. Neferah moved out after them. The remaining six followed and surrounded her as she moved away from the vessel. It was pitch black with no starlight because of a high cloud layer. The lush vegetation had a damp and musky odor reminding her of something rotting, but the total darkness didn't bother her a bit. Moving silently, Neferah traversed the 20 meters to the nearest foliage and ducked into a well-hidden path that only an experienced native hunter could see. Before she could turn around, the lighter lifted off and was out of sight; whether this was because of its cloaking system or distance, she didn't know.

Neferah's cat-like eyes made out the dark shapes of both the pathfinders and various kinds of trees and foliage. Her keen senses told her there wasn't any danger from natives in the immediate area. There were only a few carnivorous animals, which she surmised were curious, not adventurous.

She had a good feeling about being on the hunt in the dark, since her sharp teeth and claws were a match for anything she could see out there. There was a hell of a lot more to Neferah B'Tziah than these tough pathfinders could guess, and she enjoyed having sole knowledge her superior instincts and hidden weapons; pretty on the outside and dangerous on the inside.

Colonel Hourk, the pathfinder's commanding officer, motioned for her to follow him, and then moved away along the narrow path. Not a word was spoken, as the party wound its way through thick foliage and over uneven ground, making few, if any, sounds. Neferah began to appreciate these pathfinders, nine of whom were men, as they moved quickly through the absolute darkness of dense jungle undergrowth towards their target. They never missed a beat, and seemed to know their way around, although none of them had ever set foot on this planet before. These guys, she realized, were not only good, but the best.

After an hour's journey, the group stopped at the edge of a clearing, and three men went ahead to scout the terrain.

"Here's your costume, Captain," Corporal Ornah Kroeber, the only female pathfinder, whispered, "I'll help you put on the wig, makeup and ear ornaments. It'll only take a few minutes. I've got the design down pat."

"Okay kid, but don't get fresh putting that red stuff on my nipples."

"You prefer a man do it?"

"Any time." Neferah drawled.

"Hey, Nourcolt," Ornah turned her head and whispered, "we need an expert here. On the double."

"Thanks kid," Neferah smiled in the dark, "I like your discretion."

"So does Nourcolt. He likes nice soft kazoobahs."

Neferah didn't want to sit around after dressing in her silly little costume, but agreed to Colonel Hourk's request, since he was in charge of the operation.

"We've located the sideshow where your sister's being kept," Colonel Hourk spoke softly. "Sergeant Olund scouted the area and made you a map."

"Here we are Cap'n," the burly man whispered, holding a small map light over the dark paper. "You can walk over here without encountering anybody, except for a few carnie workers who don't pay attention to any one except for potential thieves. This long tent is your target, and the proprietor doesn't seem to have much business this late in the evening. So, you shouldn't have much interference from the locals. If you do, shoot and run. We'll give you cover fire."

Neferah nodded and accepted the map, looking at it carefully and then handing it back. "I've got it. Thanks."

She didn't intend to get into any shooting matches on this backward swamp. The pathfinders were mistaken if they thought she was a frail little girl who needed a laser against 'big bad men'. She knew what she had to do, and would do it her own way. Sharp teeth, claws, fast reflexes, and a dagger were all she needed.

Sergeant Olund accompanied her to the edge of the carnival grounds, which were lit by clay oil lamps hung from ropes strung between poles. The hundreds of flickering and smoking lamps gave the place an oddly ethereal appearance, as did the squat cottages of the large village outside of which it was located. There were hundreds of dark figures walking around the grounds, taking in

musical performances and animal acts. In the distance, a lot of noise was coming from a big centrally located tent, where the main attraction was apparently being staged. Now and again there would be cheers from the crowd. Olund handed her a grey leather pouch filled with copper coins, which had rough glyphs embossed on them.

"This one will pay your entry fee at the sideshow," he spoke softly, "I could see the price list outside his tent through my binoculars. The pouch came from some poor slob I incapacitated for awhile, over there." He pointed back toward the direction from which they had just come.

Neferah took the pouch and hung it from her belt.

"Okay, Cap'n, when you get your sister, make for the back fence and we'll be waiting for you."

She nodded without replying, and walked toward the entrance.

"You're kind of late for the main event, little lady," a sleazy looking carnie type leered, as she walked in. "You want some company?"

Neferah giggled coyly and smiled. "If you want to fight my husband you can. He's waiting for me in the main tent."

"No, little lady, I don't go in for insulting our customers. Have a good time." The sleazy character resumed his former posture of waiting to greet new customers, as Neferah walked daintily onto the carnival grounds.

She smiled to herself, thinking of her innocent, girlish appearance. Her childish giggle probably did it, since the creep figured she wasn't exactly rejecting him, and wasn't offended.

Walking slowly, and up on her toes like a little girl, she got her bearings and made for the side of the lot where the freak shows were located. The carnival grounds were bigger than she expected, and had a large variety of entertainments, which included numerous freak shows and other oddities. She observed various caged creatures and strange-looking animals as she passed through the side-show section. The place was filthy and the animals kept in a terrible state of physical deprivation. Directly in the center of the sideshow section, she spotted the crudely painted banner announcing the glowing-eyed freak that came from the dark swamps of Frougnod Province. Apparently that was where the lifeboat crashed. The sisterhood was able to locate the craft and recover the gamma-complexes of its dead crew members. Only one

person was missing, and she was in this freak show. The various proprietors of the sideshows were only mildly interested in attracting business, since most of the paying customers had gravitated to the main event. There would be a few rubes to be attracted after the event, and then it would be closing time.

Neferah walked daintily over to the bored-looking proprietor, who was drowsing in front of his tent.

"What kind of freak you got in there?" she asked.

Looking up at her with slow, watery eyes, the sweating man shifted in his chair. "I got me a real good one," he leered. "It's got strange eyes that look right in you and spook the shit out of you."

"I don't believe you," she giggled, "nobody can look inside of you." Neferah sized up the lean and hard-looking man, who wasn't a pushover. She'd have to kill him, since otherwise he'd put up a hell of a fight.

"Ten crubits will let you see it," he grinned, "it'll scare the shit right out of you, little lady."

"Oh, I don't know," she giggled.

"Already got you spooked, eh?"

"Well, I guess . . . but what if it doesn't scare me. Can I get my crubits back?"

The man laughed. "You think you can get something for nothing, eh? We'll see about it after you look at the evil-eyed one. Come on in."

Neferah removed one coin from her purse, the one Olund had indicated, and handed it to him. "This had better be good," she smiled, "that's a lot of crubits."

The man grinned, sizing her up, and opened the tent flap. "In here, little lady, wait till you see this one."

Neferah smiled back at him and daintily entered the tent, moving in a manner that displayed her charms without being too overbearing. She could almost feel his hungry eyes crawling all over her body.

The tent was lit by two large brass oil lamps that provided a reasonable amount of light. There was a bronze barred cage set on a low table in the middle of the floor, with a filthy creature lying against one side of it. She sensed the creature's intense presence before she saw it. The place smelled of feces and other filth which came from the cage, and the creature, which didn't move. It just lay there although its eyes followed her every movement.

Neferah walked cautiously into the tent and looked into the creatures glowing eyes. She knew who it was!

"What do you think of the thing, little lady. Look at them eyes."

Neferah spun and kicked the man in the solar plexus, doubling him up, and then dropped him with a swift chop to the back of the neck. She pulled a needle-like dagger out of her belt and pressed it into his cervical vertebra, and twisted it. Then, turning quickly, she moved over to the filthy cage and pulled the hinged door open.

Bending low, Neferah looked directly into the glowing eyes and said, "I know you, Miriam B'Mesziah. I'm taking you home."

The deep, immensely old eyes looked at her without any kind of expression, and without a moment's hesitation, Neferah knew what to do. There wasn't any way to get Miriam out of this filthy swamp, not in this condition.

She removed the tiny red crystal chip from her wisdom tooth, and held it against the woman's upper lip since all of her teeth had fallen out. Then, with her left hand, Neferah grasped the thin and shriveled neck and squeezed. The glowing eyes looked at her, then suddenly went blank. Instantly, the crystal chip took on a soft, almost imperceptible glow, and the woman was dead. Neferah removed the chip and placed it back on her wisdom tooth. Then she turned to leave.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing there?"

Neferah didn't hesitate for a second and attacked the stout, broad-shouldered man before he had a chance to defend himself. She moved quickly, raking his eyes with her extended claws, and then sprung around and onto his back as he clenched at his face. Within a few moments, she had snapped his neck and was on her way out of the tent.

Adjusting her blouse, which had slipped down to her waist, Neferah walked quickly to the back fence where the pathfinders were waiting for her. As she approached, they cut the wicker fence and made a hole for her to duck through.

"What happened? Didn't you make con . . ." Sergeant Olund whispered.

"Can it, Olund," she huffed, "I've done what I came here for. I had to kill two of the local boys. Now let's get the hell out of here."

The trek back through the jungle went smoothly, and Neferah had no trouble keeping up with the pathfinders, who moved at a fast trot all the way to the original landing site. No one spoke, but it was apparent that something was out of order, and Colonel Hourk was determined to find out the facts before they left this planet. Once they arrived at the landing site, he confronted her about the matter.

"Captain B'Tziah, I wish to speak with you privately," he spoke softly, but with deliberation.

"What can I do for you, Colonel?" she answered coolly. "Do you have a problem?"

"Yes, I might well have one," he affirmed. "As I understand it, we transported you here to rescue a marooned sister, and you were to return to this site with her. Is that not true?"

"That was the general idea," she nodded.

"Well, what the hell happened back there, and where is she?"

"I killed her."

"Did I hear you correctly, Captain?"

"Yes."

"Do you care to elaborate?"

"No. But for the sake of your official curiosity, I'll offer you this. The woman was paralyzed from the neck down, completely emaciated from ill-treatment, malnutrition, and dehydration. There was no way that I could move her without killing her. Therefore, I put her out of her misery and left. The proprietor along with one of his cronies is also dead. Is there anything else?"

"There'll have to be a report filed on the matter," Colonel Hourk spoke sternly. "I'm not entirely satisfied with your account, Captain."

"Then write your report, I won't. Is there anything else you want to discuss before our transport arrives?"

"No. Not for the moment."

The planetary lighter dropped silently out of the pitch dark sky and the pathfinders boarded without ceremony and the craft immediately lifted off again. Neferah had nothing more to say to the pathfinders so she remained in quiet thought for the entire journey, forgetting she was still dressed in her flimsy costume.

She thought about the crude village next to the carnival grounds and, in a way, found its primitive inhabitants weren't as

bad as they seemed, when viewed objectively. After all, they were low gamma-B intellects, who were still little more than animals in human form, and their insensitivity to their own conditions and treatment of human beings was brought about by innocence rather than malice. The crude village houses were stoutly built, although there wasn't any apparent sense of sanitation that she'd been able to detect, so their treatment of Miriam was probably normal by their standards. If they didn't clean their own houses, why would they bother to clean her cage?

Images of Miriam and Jenn came into her memory, almost like magic. It had been so damned long ago, back at Ling Wall Academy, and later at Styx Able IV before the Great Cataclysm. It was odd, but when she remembered Miriam it always brought Jenn's happy little face to mind, and all the great things they used to do as children.

"God, those were good times," she thought to herself, "It's never been the same since then. Miriam and Jenn, oh, if only we could be together again."

The lighter's pilot, on instructions from the Mee Amod's captain, pulled alongside the Qualo-Tae, which was still moored inside the scout freighter's open cargo bay, where Neferah immediately disembarked. Before leaving, she turned to Colonel Hourk and his troops.

"Thanks a lot for your help on this job," she spoke softly and with a tiny bit of emotion. "You people are the best, and I'm damned proud to have worked with you."

Saluting the group, in the pathfinder fashion, she turned and left the lighter.

Sergeant-at-Arms Unar Setah whistled softly under her breath, her eyes bulging slightly. "Wow! Get a load of this dolled-up cat in heat, Croamer. I'd almost swear it was our lovely little captain!"

Croamer suppressed a smile as the tan-skinned, lithe-looking girl, dressed in scanty and sexually alluring garb, marched aboard.

"Not so fast, young lady," Croamer toned, "we have to check you out and see who you are."

"Stuff it, Croamer," Neferah shot back, "let's get it over without being cute. And you, Unar, keep your yap shut!"

"Damn," she thought to herself, "I should've gotten rid of these silly rags. Now the crap's going to fly."

Croamer accompanied Neferah to the ship's security section where the captain's uniform was stored.

"I took the liberty to have your uniform brought to my quarters, where we have a guest waiting for us, Captain."

"Oh? Who's that?"

"A very special personage, Neferah, her name in our order is Sister-Reverend-Magum Batdor Zell. Everyone else knows her just as Batdor Zell."

Neferah stopped dead in her tracks, "On my ship, my god, what an honor!"

"You deserve it, Neferah."

Walking quickly to the ship's security section, the two passed Sister-Gunner Linoah Praet, who was wiping down the passage bulkheads with an absorbent cleaning tool. "Wow!" she exclaimed. Then realizing who the scantily dressed young girl with long black hair really was, she did everything she could to suppress a broad smile.

"I'll get you for that Linoah," Neferah shot out. "Get that degenerate grin off your overstuffed face!"

Linoah dropped her absorbent cleaning tool and backed against the bulkhead, totally unable to hold back her laughter. "God! What has our little captain been up to . . . huh, oh, boy!"

"I'll get you, garbage face."

Neferah couldn't believe how many of her crew seemed to show up in this single corridor just when she wanted to be completely incognito.

"Whoopsy do! Somebody's got laid!"

"Come on now people, this can't be our innocent little captain all dressed up for a quick lay!"

"Where ya got him hid, Cap'n? Don't be selfish and keep him all to yourself."

"Where's your underwear, honey?"

"Hey, she's really a brunette!"

The cat calls and happy jeers increased as her temper flared. It seemed that nobody in her entire crew had any fear of her retribution. Well, the whole gang of horny degenerates would soon find out. They were in for a tough voyage home, and that was for sure.

"So you are the daughter of the stone desert. Please be you my honored friend, young princess of the crystal sands and my Sister-

Captain Neferah B'Tziah," the strongly built woman spoke with perfect tones of the Tzian high-dialect.

Neferah blushed for the first time in her life, realizing that she was standing before one of the two most powerful living women in the Nashramh Sisterhood and dressed in nothing more than a scanty costume without any underwear on.

Batdor Zell was a medium-sized woman with a stout frame and well-muscled arms and legs, although she didn't give any appearance of being either tough or athletic. Her features were soft, having grey-white skin with tints of green and pink blending at the cheeks and short grey hair. Most striking, though, were her softly glowing lavender eyes that seemed to be a million years old. Neferah fell in love with this oddly beautiful woman who reminded her so much of Ruby, whom she had met in a trance so many years ago.

"Please forgive my most bizarre attire, My Grace," she replied in the same dialect. "May peace be with you."

"Yes, my young princess, I must agree with Miriam, you are truly an exotic beauty. Her masculine part, Raphael, is a true judge of such matters, and it was through their eyes that I saw you enter the tent and make their rescue. May I have your survival chip, please?"

"It is my honor, My Grace," Neferah purred as she removed the chip from her wisdom tooth. "I thank you for entrusting me with this honor."

"Thank you, Captain."

Neferah couldn't see what Zell did with the chip, but she definitely had the foreboding feeling of something deep and powerful happening in the room. It was almost like being near the outer rim of an all engulfing vortex, although it seemed to be somewhere else, and that didn't make any sense when she thought about it. Then the feeling passed.

Neferah exchanged clothing and donned her uniform and boots. Now, at least she felt a bit more comfortable in Zell's presence.

"You look more like a ship's captain with that wig off and your jumpsuit on," Zell smiled. "Well, Croamer, did the crew get their digs in when you two left the airlock?"

"Oh yes, my Grace," Croamer nodded, suppressing a smile of her own. "That they did."

"You may torture them on the way back to port, Captain, but not after you arrive. They will have a two year's leave during which they can receive additional training while they otherwise enjoy some male companionship. You do agree, do you not?"

Neferah had been thinking of confining the entire degenerate gang on board until they were ready to go out on another patrol, but Zell made her point.

"Yes, My Grace. I agree completely."

"Good. Now you may take on 500 torpedoes and 700 mines from the Mee Amod before returning to your base. Once you arrive there, you will be having some new targeting equipment installed and tested. That will take two years, after which you will be given some special assignments in order to test their design capabilities. It should prove to be interesting, hey?"

"I thank you for your consideration, My Grace . . . I don't really know what to say. . . ."

"Oh, we have a few pleasant surprises in store for you during the next few hundred years, Neferah," Zell smiled. "You and your most engaging crew are very special to us, and we won't let you down. No, we won't let you down at all."

Neferah didn't have the slightest idea of what Batdor Zell was talking about, but Croamer obviously did. She was having trouble keeping a straight face, which was exceptional for any of these security women. Whatever it was, Neferah would have to wait and see. There was no doubt that it would be something she'd never be able to guess at.

Neferah and Croamer escorted Sister-Reverend-Magum Zell to the ship's airlock where they parted as friends. Neferah never forgot the look on Croamer's face when Zell left the ship. The woman was nearly in tears, and this most singular episode completely changed Neferah's opinion about these security sisters. She realized that they were truly sensitive human beings and nothing like the emotionless creatures she'd thought them to be. For the first time, she really liked Croamer.

Chapter 3

Decision

Sister Jannanine B'Mesziah was sent into exile from our sisterhood and delivered to her home world on the afternoon 10 DEMIN 8352-7N5. She spent the remainder of her life in a river delta community peopled with Low Elves and Winged Faeries who knew nothing of off-world affairs.

Exile for Jenn wasn't exactly a punishment . . . since there wasn't any crime to punish . . . it was, I would suggest, a lesson in values and rationale for selfless dedication. . . .

13:20-03 DEMIN 1001-8N5

Elves and faeries were everywhere, making preparations for the big party. This was going to be a great affair with all sorts of High Elves from the far-off western mountains, and some wonderful people from up in the sky. Everybody was excited, and all sorts of fruit, vegetables, roots, juices, and specialty preserves of honey and nectar were being brought out for the grand ball. Musicians were coming from all over the Enchanted Forest to perform and show off their talents. There would be singing and dancing, along with all kinds of storytelling, especially by the wonderful people from up in the heavens.

Chauncy and Nettie were going to open their cottage to the people from the sky, and invite them to stay there during their entire visit. Their friend, Neff, thought it was a good idea too; their lovely daughter, Jenn, would meet the people who came from the stars just like she had so many years ago. Everybody knew that Jenn had come from the stars, even though she was born to Nettie,

a long time ago. After all, Neff and the other faeries said so! And the faeries knew all about this kind of thing. Besides, Jenn could think of all sorts of grown-up things, even without a thinking cap, and that was proof of her special nature. Otherwise, she was a happy little Low Elf just like everybody else in the Enchanted Forest.

Jenn was laying on her stomach next to a deep pool she called her 'thinking pond', and stirring the slow moving water with her fingers. She liked coming here alone, except for Neff of course, to think and daydream about all sorts of things. There were happy things Neff told her about, such as the great places on Mesziah where water almost looks like mallow jelly, and heavy wooded areas that are different from the Enchanted Forest. Neff also told her about the Bumble Bugs and the slow, lumbering Thoudle-Bars that crash through forests in search of special mosses and cones they eat in massive amounts. It amazed her to learn that not all faeries have wings, and many elves have very short, fine hair which make them look as though they have none. Some elves from the mountains even have antennae with which they sort of smell, hear and see with. They almost seem to be a race unto themselves, but are elves all the same, and mostly from the High Order.

Then, there were sad memories, which Jenn tried not to think about. Especially things from the past . . . from times before she was born. When Jenn thought about Miriam, or Raphael, who were the same person, or Mirisca, whom she so loved . . . she broke out in tears. As much as she tried to think of only good and happy things, these memories would always sneak into her mind and upset her.

"What're you thinking about, Jenn?" Neff asked, noting the odd expression appearing on her friend's face more often these days. "You look sad. Is something wrong?"

"No. I'm just thinking about something."

"But you look so serious. Can't you tell me about what you're thinking?"

"Oh, it's just something I seem to remember from a long time ago. I try not to think about it, but the memories keep popping up in my mind and I can't stop wondering about them."

"What kind of memories, Jenn?"

"Just memories . . ." She shook her head sadly and continued.
"I think I know why I was sent home to be in exile. Yes, I think it's time I start growing up and accepting my responsibilities."

"What do you mean by that, Jenn?"

"By what?"

You know, Jen, responsibilities and growing up."

"I don't think you would understand, Neff. Its so complicated and different from anything we know about here on Mesziah."

"Oh my, you must be thinking about all sorts of things. Oh, do tell me about them."

Jenn turned to her little friend, who was sitting on a green leaf and glowing softly. Neff had been her friend ever since she was born and never left her side, except for short periods when she was asleep. Her mother, Nettie, said that Neff knew her long before when she first arrived on Mesziah from the stars. Neff was there waiting . . . yes, she'd been sitting on a beautiful rose petal waiting for her.

Little Neff was the first person Jenn met when she arrived on Mesziah. She'd been so scared on that first day, when she was placed here in exile. She was tired, confused and didn't know what to expect. But then, Neff was waiting there and made everything seem different. She'd turned a frightening situation into something wonderful with a party. Yes, that party with all her little elf friends had done the trick and everything was better from that day on.

"Oh, please tell me, Jenn."

Jenn turned back toward the slow flowing water and continued stirring it with her fingers.

"Well, you remember when you first met me, Neff? When I came down the stairs from where the flying machine left me a long time ago . . . you know, before I died?"

"Oh my, oh my, indeed. That wasn't the first time I knew you, Jenn. Why I knew you long before then, when you first saw Telaki. That was when I gave him my name to be part of his and he became Neftalak. Oh yes, yes indeed. I even knew you long before that when you were just brand new . . . we've been friends for a very long time, Jenn. So, you can tell me about what's bothering you."

Jenn stopped stirring the water and looked over at her glowing little friend. "Have we been friends for that long? From when I was brand new . . . and you knew Neftalak?"

Neff always surprised Jenn. She was such an innocent little creature. Neff had such a haphazard thinking process, like all faeries do, that it was difficult to think she could actually remember that far back in time. Neff would say something with such insight that Jenn began to think there was much more to these little people than what appeared on the surface.

"Oh yes. Oh yes, indeed. We've been friends since you first came to life as an elf, ever so long ago. And truly, I know Neftalak, oh yes I do."

Tears came into Jenn's eyes as she broke down and sobbed. Then, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she told Neff about her recurring memories and the realization they brought into her mind.

"I know I was sent here to learn what it is that we of the Nashramh are protecting. You see, I didn't realize what we were fighting for out there in the void. But now I can see that if we don't stop the terrible forces of Adam Belial from invading our galaxy, then our beautiful Mesziah and all of our innocent little elves and faeries will become their victims. I can see the High Elves who come here before leaving for the stars, and I know they are making a real sacrifice of their innocence to protect this world. I have to go back to the stars now and do my part for Mesziah and my sisterhood."

"Oh my, you have begun to grow up, Jenn. When are you going back to your sisterhood?"

"After I talk to my mother and father and get their permission. I can't just go away without their consent. After all they are my parents."

"Oh yes, they are your parents."

"I feel so different about things now, Neff. I guess being here on my home world has helped me see things in a different light than before. I know I must leave Mesziah now and maybe forever, and accept all of my responsibilities with my sisterhood."

Neff darted off her leaf and left it bobbing in the breeze, and fluttered around Jenn, trying to speed things along.

"Okay Neff, I know you're ready to go," Jenn giggled, "I must talk to my parents now, before I do anything else."

"Oh yes. Yes indeed. We must go and talk to Chauncy and Nettie right away. Oh my, this is so sudden, but we must tell them right away, before the big party. Oh, yes indeed!"

Jenn got up and started walking back toward her home, now feeling she had the entire weight of Mesziah on her shoulders. She knew what her responsibility was and there would be no turning back. Neff fluttered around, ahead, and then behind her while chattering about the awesome and wonderful decision Jenn had made.

Chauncy and Nettie were strangely silent when Jenn and Neff asked them about leaving for the stars. Both listened as Neff chirped about all sorts of things called duties and responsibilities in a rambling monologue that even confused Jenn at times.

"Oh dear, oh yes, Nettie," Neff chirped, remembering something she'd nearly forgotten, "don't we have something stored away for Jenn? Oh, we must bring it out now! Oh yes indeed!"

Nettie thought for a moment, then remembered what it was Neff was talking about. She nodded her head and then disappeared into her bedroom. When she came out, she was holding a little black beanie and there were tears in her eyes.

"This is yours from a long time ago, Jenn, and I think Neff is right. It is time for you to have it, if you're thinking of going back to the stars."

Jenn accepted the little beanie, noting that it was truly very old. This was something her mother had kept and treasured from before she was born. Neff gave it to Nettie to keep, and now giving it to Jenn was a symbol of real love. There were tears in Jenn's eyes when she accepted the beanie and then hugged Nettie close to her.

"Can't we wait until after the grand party to talk of such things?" Chauncy asked timidly, wiping his nose with a napkin, and trying to control the huge tears flooding into his eyes. Nettie was already sobbing about her wonderful little daughter, Jenn, who was so young and tender.

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed," Neff chirped. "We must all discuss this after the grand party. Oh, yes indeed."

Jenn put her hand on Chauncy's arm and nodded sadly. "I'll do what you think is best, Daddy. I won't do anything unless you and Mom say it's alright."

Chauncy wiped his nose again and then hugged her close to him, still trying to control his tears. "We'll talk about it later, honey."

The grand ball was more than anyone expected it to be, even though they'd planned on something big. There were more people, by far, than were invited. This was usual for elves; if 50 were invited, 150 would show up for a party. Although most brought all sorts of refreshments and musical instruments with them, there was more than enough food to go around. Nobody wanted to miss this grand affair. The High Elf guests from the western mountains arrived in big flying machines that came and went, leaving ever more of them, until at least a thousand had been delivered. There were only about 100 of the wonderful people from the stars with them, and they all spoke the Low Elf's Meszian sub-dialect perfectly. Four of them accepted Chauncy and Nettie's invitation to stay at their cottage and proved to be gracious guests.

Festivities were already well under way when the High Elves from the mountains and their friends from the stars arrived. Now everything really got going as the newcomers added their stories and songs to everyone else's. The elves couldn't get enough of the wonderful new stories, especially those about the far-off stars and all the funny people who lived on worlds circling around them. Nobody had even considered that Mesziah revolved around her own sun, except for a few who'd talked to Jenn about it, since the clouds were so thick that nobody ever saw their sun, or the stars for that matter. Of course, everybody knew about their moon, where the faeries came from, even though they couldn't see it either.

The people from the stars were dressed differently from everybody, in black or grey uniforms, but had garlands of flowers strung around their necks and in their hair which helped a great deal. They did know what good food was, though, and didn't turn anything down. And boy, did they know a lot of good songs and stories!

Jenn felt uncomfortable with their four guests, who were friendly and gracious in every way, but seemed to be sort of . . . what was it . . . aloof? After awhile, she left the party and went to her thinking pond to consider what was wrong. The three women, and one man, were very polite and laughed at everyone's jokes, but there was still something amiss, almost as if they were waiting . . . but for what? It had to do with how they looked at her . . . that was it. They seemed to be looking right into her, almost as if they knew something about her that she didn't, or maybe they were just

sort of different. Whatever it was, Jenn knew that they weren't bad people, only strange . . . or was it that they were familiar? After thinking about this problem for a couple of hours, Jenn decided to go back to the party and watch them for a while.

"Hello Jenn," Sister Rolan Mouldon, the tall woman with clear green eyes smiled. "Your mother, Nettie, has been telling me about your plans to leave for the stars. Do you really want to go there?"

Nettie was sitting across the room with her eyes glued on Jenn's face.

"Yes. I've discussed the subject with my mom and dad," Jenn agreed. "Although I've told them what I intend to do, I won't do anything without their willing permission. If they say no, then I won't press the matter because I respect both their feelings and opinions."

"I understand, Jenn. But, you didn't answer my question. Do you really want to go there?"

"No. I don't really want to leave my parents or my world, but I do have my responsibilities. I'm a member of our Nashramh Sisterhood and I really must accept my mortal responsibilities along with the rest of my sisters. I was sent here, in exile, because I didn't understand what it was all about. Now I know what it is we're defending and I have to do my part. I have my duty and there isn't any way I can squirm out of it, even if I have to wait until my next lifetime."

"So you respect your parents' feelings and opinions that much, do you? I do believe you are ready to join with us again, Jenn. I think your mother and father feel the same way, for they've discussed it many times with the faeries, even before you were born. They've lived with this knowledge every day of your life, and they love you and their world enough to let you go. They are both very deep and compassionate people, Jenn, and we too respect their feelings and opinions. We'll all talk about this later. Now let's enjoy this wonderful party."

Later that night after Jenn and her parents returned to their cottage, Jenn picked up her little beanie and turned it around in her hands. She walked slowly into her room and closed the door behind her. Then, turning to her round mirror, hanging on the wall, Jenn placed the beanie on her head and looked at herself as if through new eyes.

"Yes, this does look right. It is my beanie and I should be wearing it from now on."

The beanie felt very much in place, on top of her head, and she knew that was where it belonged. Jenn knew she was making the correct decision, as hard as it had been to arrive at, and she would be leaving for the stars with her sisters.

* * *

It had been 224 years since Jenn left Mesziah with Sister Rolan Mouldon. Chauncy and Nettie agreed to let her leave, and Neff insisted on accompanying her. To Jenn's surprise, the Nashramh security people didn't mind the winged faery tagging along. In fact, they ignored the little creature.

Jenn was taken to a Nashramh scout freighter and then to a hidden world, somewhere out on the sixth arm rim, where she would spend the next two centuries learning her basic trade as a Sister-Security Officer.

Training for security specialists is more than preparation and conditioning for combat duty and associated skills . . . it is also a test of character . . . a test of one's humanity.

22:16-03 SHIKIM 1175-8N5

Jenn stood silently watching as a dozen pedestrians walked along the dimly lit street. No one noticed her moving quickly through the shadows and now she stopped for awhile to rest before making for the lakeshore. Her little friend Neff stopped fluttering around and was sitting on part of a metal fence waiting for her to continue on her long journey. Reflecting for a moment, Jenn remembered her final briefing before being dropped into this test situation. Sister Roskah Luscot outlined her assignment and general instructions for the test.

"You'll be dropped at an undisclosed location in a major urban area, from which you will proceed to make your way to your target destination, here," she pointed to a point on a wall map, "and deliver your blue chip to me in 90 hours. You'll be in hostile territory, since the city is ridden with crime and violence of every description. No one is safe on the streets at night, unless they're armed and looking for trouble in the first place. During the daylight hours, your uniform and off-world appearance will make you a target for abuse and even murder, so you'll have no allies or

any means of transportation other than your own feet. If you are faced by an aggressor, don't attempt to reason with him or her, but either escape quickly or kill the individual instantly. This is a test of the extreme, and you'll be completely on your own."

Jenn didn't intend to shoot anyone with her laser pistol, or to use her knife to defend herself. This was a test of her character as well as her evasion and survival techniques. Actually, she'd been taught how to kill without the use of weapons, but still preferred to use minimum force, if any at all. Stealth and intelligence were her best weapons, and she intended to use them to the utmost. After all, she'd made it across the entire city in two days without running afoul of the local natives or their vicious animals. There'd been a dozen close calls, but that was all they were. Now, as the evening of her last day was progressing, she had to traverse the hardest section of her journey; the lakeshore.

The great freshwater lake was the size of a small ocean, and its rolling surf had incoming and outgoing tides that were affected by the planet's single moon. The heavily guarded estates lining its shores belonged to the cities wealthy who didn't allow any kind of trespassing on their property. Any unauthorized person caught on any of their private beaches, or other property, was subject to criminal prosecution, providing they lived long enough to be tried in the courts. The beaches in front of the luxurious estates were well-guarded by special security systems consisting of electronic scanners, infrared detectors, pressure switches, and a score of other sophisticated devices that could detect anyone moving along the beach or on the estate grounds. Once any of these devices was tripped, huge floodlights were activated along that stretch of beach and vicious guard dogs were released to hunt down the intruder. Armed guards would follow the dogs and capture or kill the criminal.

"Oh dear, what a terrible way to have to live, Neff, just think, with beautiful homes like this and a wonderful beach to play on, and not to be able to enjoy it. They can't even take walks alone for fear of being killed by criminals, or worse, their neighbors. What a shame!"

"Oh my, oh my yes indeed," Neff agreed, "this isn't like Mesziah. Indeed it isn't."

According to Sister Luscot, there were hardened thugs who were experts at bypassing these security systems and who either

burglarized the estates or murdered their owners. Contract killing was a favorite means for wealthy opponents to deal with one another or to settle grudges. This wasn't a very nice society to live in, no matter what rank you held.

Moving cautiously, Jenn approached the long stretch of beach and noted its irregularities in the moonlight. She would have to go 22 kilometers to reach her destination across a bay, which was too wide to swim. Besides, she was supposed to traverse the beach and bypass the security systems to pass this part of the test. She wasn't worried about the scanning devices or infrared detectors, which were set just under a meter above ground level because of the various logs and other debris that came in with the tide. She'd been told that the sensors could distinguish between small animals and sea birds in the area. A person's weight was a factor with some of the devices, while other characteristics were programmed into the security alarm's computer circuits. The real trick was to avoid the pressure switches and other devices planted in both permanent traps and various revolving locations by the security people. These were the real problem and would require her undivided attention. The fact that she was both small in stature and 20 percent lighter in density than other people, made it easier for Jenn to move quickly and quietly along the deserted beach. Neff would be a help here, since she seemed to notice everything as she fluttered around in Jenn's path. As it turned out, Jenn moved along swiftly in the dim light of the rising moon which proved to be a real benefit, although it could make her more visible to some of the scanners.

After about 11 kilometers, Jenn's legs were getting pretty tired. She'd worked out regularly at the academy's obstacle course and kept in top condition, but she still had her limits. Moving over to a low bulkhead to rest, she sat down and studied the terrain ahead of her. Then, something caught her attention out of the side of her left eye; it was a movement . . . yes definitely a movement.

"Oh my, there's somebody coming, Jenn. Oh yes, there surely is somebody coming from behind us," Neff chirped, "and he is not a nice person. Oh no, he certainly is not a nice person!"

The man, who appeared to be lean and tough, was dressed in black garments that didn't reflect light. He was doubled over and moved swiftly and deliberately as if he knew where all the traps were located. Stopping every few meters, he seemed to be listening

for something, then he proceeded along the beach until he was out of sight, having passed Jenn and Neff by a mere five meters without seeing them. This was, Jenn guessed, one of those professional thugs she'd been told about. Now she had to be careful not to run afoul of either him or any of the alarms.

Neff was totally surprised by the man's appearance, and began to flutter around.

"Oh my, don't worry, Jenn. You watch out for the alarms and I'll watch for that mean man. I'll go ahead and see where he is. Oh yes, indeed I will."

Rising to her feet, she began to move quietly along the beach, but not by the same path taken by the intruder, while Neff went on ahead. Jenn was straining her senses to detect anything out of the ordinary when she came face-to-face with the hard-looking man. He stood crouched in a fighting stance, and there was something deadly clenched in his left hand.

"Oh my, oh my, I didn't see him, Jenn. I really didn't see him!" Neff cried fluttering out of the shadows.

Jenn ducked to the side as the dark figure lunged at her and picked up a heavy rock as she did so. Then moving lithely past him, she nearly escaped, but his right hand caught her arm as he turned to use his weapon. Without warning, she swung the heavy stone up and smashed it against the side of his face, knocking him down and releasing his grip on her arm. Before he could regain his senses, Jenn was out of sight, moving swiftly along the beach toward a deep inlet of water blocking her way.

Fragor Tinod shook his head to clear it and struggled to his feet. He wasn't going to let this little competitor get away from him, and he was going to kill the bastard. Standing up, his head swirling from the impact of the rock, Fragor didn't realize he'd tripped a silent alarm from a scanner beam. Within moments, huge floodlights came on and the entire beach was aglow.

Fragor didn't have time to clear his senses, but raw instinct guided him back in the direction from which he'd just come. He would have evaded capture except that he triggered a second alarm which gave his pursuers a line to track him by. In 10 minutes, it was all over for Fragor Tinod, professional thief and assassin. Four huge black guard dogs ran him down and tore his throat out in a killing frenzy.

"Oh my, oh my indeed," Neff chirped as the floodlights came on, "what will we do, Jenn?"

"Don't worry, Neff, I'm going swimming."

"Oh yes, yes indeed. You must go swimming."

Jenn slipped into the water and ducked under the surface. She'd picked up two large smooth stones from the beach and forced them into her uniform's side pockets to act as ballast and weight her down so she'd have less trouble staying under water. Then she activated the face-mask's rectifier unit which supplied her with 30 minutes of air before she had to surface. By that time she'd be well away from the shore and could swim the rest of the way to her target.

One thing about being an elf was that she was extremely buoyant and swimming was easy. If she got tired, then she'd just rest in the water like a cork bobbing around. Neff fluttered above her and followed Jenn all the way across the remainder of the bay.

"Hey, what's going on?" Jenn cried out, brushing something away from her head as she floated in the easy swell of water.

"Oh my, it's a giant bird and he's trying to eat you!" Neff chirped.

The large sea bird circled and dropped down again, trying to capture the fluttering little creature glowing in the dark above the water's surface. Again, he struck something else that was hard and solid in the water. Then it disappeared and on his third attack, he splashed into the water. Returning to the surface, the Shoscole flew off in disgust, not wanting to be dunked again.

Jenn swam under water for a short distance, then resurfaced. The bird was gone and she rested for awhile before resuming her journey. Neff continued to flutter around chirping about how inconsiderate the terrible bird was and how he deserved his bath.

The swim didn't take as long as she expected and Jenn finally arrived at her target point, a large grey building near a point of land at the head of the bay.

Jenn stood at attention, waiting for Sister-Commander Jolean Lufko to complete her evaluation of Jenn's field test. Jolean took her time and checked each item on the program list against actual performance factors. Nodding to herself, the Commander wondered how Jenn could keep her attention on dangerous situations with that tiny pest, Neff, fluttering around with her incessant chirping

and chattering. Still, the results of Jenn's performance were definitely positive, if not outstanding.

"Well you certainly made good time, Jenn," Roskah Luscot nodded, "82 hours and 16 minutes. Now, can you tell me what happened back on the beach? There was a man killed there."

Jenn explained exactly what happened and described her defensive action.

"I feel terrible about hurting him," she spoke softly, "and I had no idea that I hit him hard enough to kill him."

"Oh you didn't kill him, Jenn. He apparently set off a couple of alarms and a pack of guard dogs ran him down. The Nooserek Estate's security police didn't have the slightest idea you'd ever been there. It's unfortunate that the man attempted to take your life and you had to defend yourself, but that's how things are. In the real world, we're often faced with these tragic decisions, and you're well aware that each of us has a responsibility to defend ourselves. It's his fault that he died on the beach, since he was clearly the aggressor. By the way, he was known to be a professional assassin as well as an accomplished thief."

"I still feel sorry for him," Jenn answered, "although I'd do the same thing over again if it happened."

"Oh yes, oh yes indeed. There are so many terrible things that happen to people, and people get hurt," Neff cried out. "Oh, it's so terrible that mean people get hurt."

"That's the way it is, Jenn."

* * *

Jenn left Meszhiah, accompanied by Neff, and reentered active service with our Sisterhood. To her surprise, she was sent to the Academy of The Ginger and The Rose for many years of training and initiated into the ranks of our Nashramh Security Force. She passed all of her tests and was never forced to kill anyone, although she did have to defend herself on six different occasions.

Just think about it . . . a little Low Elf assigned to a security organization peopled by big, tough Delta-type grey-uniformed combat specialists . . . and she had more surprises to come.

11:45-28 BENEM 1225-8N5

Jenn never dreamed that she, of all people, would become one of those grey-uniformed security women, but now she was. Her training took place at the 'Academy of the Ginger and the Rose', which was founded by Sister-Magum Batdor Zell nearly 275,000 years ago. The other trainees at this academy were sweet and gentle people, even the physically tough 'delta' types. There wasn't a single mean or hostile woman or man on the entire planet. This, Jenn learned, was one of the secrets of the security force; all of its members were drawn from genuinely good and gentle women and men. There were a large number of men in the Nashramh's security organization, and this came as a real surprise to her. There was no room for people who would knowingly set out to hurt anyone. The primary role of the Nashramh's security order was to protect the sisterhood from all inside and outside violence, infiltration by the black ones and most importantly, to operate the widespread Necro-Classic Authority for the entire sisterhood.

No one ever hit, shot or killed another person, in or outside the sisterhood, unless it was in self-defense or the defense of another person. Even in the stringent tests, where individuals were armed and placed into dangerous settings, no one ever killed anyone. These tests, she soon realized, were more a measure of her character than of her fighting or survival skills. The few exceptions where security personnel were used in questionable enterprises, such as with the Sahlie Lor affair or those of a few other ostracized sisters, nearly led to their revolt. It was against their basic nature, as well as their stringent laws to engage in any kind of harsh behavior against any innocent person, no matter if it was ordered by a higher authority. Strange as it appeared, at first, it was mandated by law that each security operative be an expert killer, who was forbidden to either fight or kill without just cause. In fact, to stand by and allow someone else to be hurt by an aggressor was considered a capital crime. Because of this stringent set of rules and others, the security women seldom spoke to, or fraternized with anyone outside their own organization. This way, they remained more objective in their duties.

The real surprise came when Jenn completed her training and was initiated into the Order of the Ginger and the Rose. The initiation didn't involve a ceremony, but was, in fact the process of

becoming a binary-extended with every woman and man in the organization. Yes, with every other security sister and brother through a mechanism understood by only three people; Batdor Zell, Ruby of the Sacred Stone, and Rinim Poodor. Now Jenn understood what the security sisters were looking for when they peered into her eyes . . . they were looking into her very soul and transmitting the image back to their Necro-Classic core group at Council Central. She was no longer alone because she was not only a part of Miriam's extended personality, but a part of all the rest of her security sisters. The Order of the Ginger and the Rose was truly a unique and beautiful sisterhood within the body of the Nashramh.

Now Jenn was being transferred to a G.C.C. Naval Command Rim Area Defense Station somewhere out on the seventh arm rim. She'd been delivered to Chanzol-M Station, in the Trouk-San II star system, on a Nashramh scout freighter, and from there to the Starship Supreme 'Silver Crown'. Her primary function was to serve as an intelligence officer for the Nashramh, and she carried the rank of Senior Lieutenant, which was the equivalent of a G.C.C. Navy Sub-Captain. While en route, Jenn worked as a special linguist in the starliner's communications center. This entire assignment was a new experience for her, and she looked forward to every bit of it. Only one thing bothered her, and that was Neff. The little faery, who seldom left her side, was acting odd, almost secretive, if that were possible for a faery. Jenn wondered if there was something wrong with her tiny friend, but Neff denied everything in her rambling and disjointed way. Still, there was definitely something different about her.

Today was Shabo, Jenn's day off, and she was enjoying it by dedicating herself to being a fish. That is, by spending the entire day in the facility's huge, deep swimming pool that was designed like a wonderful lake with fish and other kinds of natural forms in it. She loved swimming around with her friends from the security section, and investigating all the hidden treasures below the water's surface.

Jenn always loved to paddle around in the water and had a reputation among her co-workers, for being more of a fish than an elf. She had no fear of water whatsoever, even after nearly drowning back on Grumbok-Tor after the Clunk crashed there during the Great Conflagration. It was fun to paddle around on the

water's surface or crawl along the bottom where all the interesting goodies could be found. This swimming pool wasn't exactly the same as the pools and streams back on Mesziah, but she let her fertile imagination make up for its shortcomings. Neff would flutter around above the surface, making sure everything was going well, and talking excitedly to herself about how wonderful Jenn's adventures must be.

"Hey Jenn, we're going to get some lunch. Come on out for awhile, you shouldn't stay in there by yourself. You know the rules," Shorty Frunket yelled, as he pulled on his robe. "Come on, join us for lunch."

"You needn't worry," a voice from behind Jenn called out. "I'll keep an eye on her."

Something about the woman's voice caused the hairs to stand straight up on the back of her neck.

"Hey, thanks. Jenn's a fish today, and getting her out of the water is like pulling teeth, only a bit harder," Shorty laughed. "See you later."

Jenn stood at the shallow end of the huge pool, only her head and shoulders protruding from the green water. Then, turning slowly, she saw Neff fluttering around in an odd and erratic fashion.

She'd experienced a feeling of apprehension earlier that morning, and expected something different to happen. Unfortunately Neff's peculiar attitude, compounded by her fluttering around like a nitwit, only confused the issue.

"Do I know you?" she spoke out, turning to face the stranger at the pool's edge.

"Of course you do," the lovely woman laughed.

Jenn thought her heart was about to stop from shock! Those soft, deep red eyes . . . they were . . . Miriam's!

"Oh my God, it's you!" Jenn exclaimed.

"Oh, isn't this wonderful!" Neff chirped, "oh my, oh my, indeed. And to think, I actually kept a secret!"

"You see, nothing ever happens by accident in our sisterhood," Miriam laughed happily, "and even faeries can keep a secret if it's good enough."

"Oh yes, oh yes, yes indeed!" Neff exclaimed excitedly, fluttering around in circles and making a pest of herself. "Oh this is surely fun and I actually kept a secret all by myself!"

"Oh, my God," Jenn exclaimed again, making for the edge of the pool. "I can't believe it! Why couldn't I feel your presence? I just can't believe it!"

"You did all the time, that's why you couldn't tell the difference. Besides, I wanted to surprise you," Miriam smiled as she slid into the cool water.

"Remember what Raphael told you about becoming part of a binary-extended? It means that you'll never be alone again. You haven't been alone since we parted at Three-Stones Academy, even though we were physically separated. Nothing really happens by accident in our sisterhood, not even our meeting here."

The two came together and hugged. Then they talked for an hour before the other security people returned from lunch. This meeting was to last for five years until they left the Silver Crown and went their separate directions. Neff never left them for a moment. She filled in all the silent moments with her happy chirping and singing.

Chapter 4

Patrol

While our Nashramh forces are generally engaged in sixth-arm rim space operations, the Ansharim Brotherhood has expanded its naval activities to include a wide strip of space, 120 light years beyond the seventh arm rim, to intercept and observe enemy entry into the Starset Galaxy. What appears to be a simple task of covert observation is, now and again, punctuated by the unexpected. . . .

12:06-30 ELIM 1230-8N5

An odd signal appeared on the ship's primary grid-screen just four degrees below the elliptic in the port 'nun' band. The scattered signal was turning slowly in the void and was both solid and varied in density. The Combat Intelligence Center's spectral analysis probes indicated no metal in the loosely turning mass, although ice crystals and some sort of organic composition registered on their monitors. Unfortunately, the mass didn't reflect enough light from the distant stars for accurate observation or measurement, and the extreme distance made any other analysis virtually impossible for the time being.

The Ansharim scout destroyer TU9310 'Corbol' had been on patrol 120 light years beyond the seventh arm's outer rim for seven years. She was preparing another angular grid shift of 15 degrees when the strange signal appeared on the bridge's primary gridscreen, the 19th sighting made during the patrol. The previous encounters had been with incoming enemy warships from Samael's far-off empire. This was different and everyone was apprehensive. The object, or objects, weren't the usual clutter of galactic gases

and primordial debris, nor remnants of a battle or wreck. There just weren't any telltale signs of radiation that signaled the death of ancient ships or detonated thermal mines. No, this was something else.

Red alert was sounded and all weapons systems primed for immediate action. The Corbol slowly approached the strange shape. CIC and the long-range search radars probed the area all around the site to ensure that nothing hostile was in striking range, while the ship's battle shields and cloaking system were at full projection.

It was unbelievable. There were more than 240,000 naked human bodies tied together in long lines, of 1,000 by strong synthetic cords. Upon closer observation, it was discovered that the bodies were made up of men, women, and children, all with their hands tied behind their backs.

Arden watched intently as the magnified gridscreen module focused in on the lifeless forms floating in absolute darkness, except for the brightly focused Argon crystal search lights from the Ansharim scout destroyer. He could see their blackened faces now, and felt a sudden chill run down his spine as he studied their grotesque features. They had either been alive when they were thrust out into the vacuum, or freshly killed, since their exploded entrails and twisted limbs indicated this possibility. It was obvious that the long strings of people were deliberately dumped out in the void by some as yet unknown monsters.

"I've never heard of Sargon's faithful ever pulling a stunt like this, Ardel," Captain Roun noted, pulling absent-mindedly at his moustache. "No. I've never heard of them pulling something like this. They want slaves for their ungodly projects, not abandoned corpses."

"I agree," Arden nodded, "this is a new twist."

"I wonder if they might've been dumped out here by members of their own kind, possibly punishment or retribution for some sort of mass crime."

"It's a thought, Tod, although with children being with them, it could be that they were diseased and infecting the others . . . its anyone's guess at this point."

"We're coming into contact range in a couple of minutes. Now we can have a better look."

"We'll have to bring some aboard to study," Arden answered, not taking his eyes off the magnified screen. "Has security collect any gamma-complexes there might be and try to match them up with each corpse if possible."

"I'll do that," Captain Roun agreed, turning to his comm-link.

The three men ducked into the quarantine section's airlock and closed its thick hatch behind them. After a few moments, a second hatch opened, allowing them to enter another chamber where they changed from their environmental uniforms to one-piece medical garb equipped with special sealed headgear. Not a single millimeter of their skin remained exposed to the surrounding atmosphere as they left the dressing room through a third hatch. All precautions were made to prevent entry of alien parasites or unknown diseases that might have accompanied the corpses. Passing through the next room, which was equipped with special showers and other decontaminating equipment, the men entered the last airlock and waited for the hatch to open.

"Come on in and take a look at this, My Grace," Med-Tech Klooper nodded to Ardel, "These little creatures are all vegetarians, but whoever was eating on them was definitely carnivorous."

"Do you think they were killed and then fed to wild animals?" Ardel asked, studying the blackened corpse of a small woman or girl-child.

"No. First of all, this young woman was still alive when she was being eaten, and second, she was tied down to something . . . possibly a table, and torn into by more than one predator. You can see here that the beasts like only certain parts of their victim's bodies and throw the rest of them away when they're finished. All of the corpses show the same pattern. Believe it or not, most of these little creatures were still alive when they were dumped into the vacuum. I don't know whether or not they were stored in a non-pressurized cargo hold before being thrown out into the void or what the procedure was. Whatever the answer is, most of them were still alive when they were exposed to the absolute zero temperature of outer space."

The woman's corpse, although black and waxy from long exposure to the void, still showed signs of a petite and pretty figure. Large chunks had been gnawed out of the backs of her thighs by very sharp teeth, and signs of their shapes were obvious

in the large open wounds. otherwise, the body was relatively undamaged.

After studying the woman's body and conferring with Yal Klooper about the many others he'd performed autopsies on, Arden and his companions returned to the airlock, showered and proceeded through the decontamination process before entering back into the ship. Now the second phase of the investigation would begin.

Arden didn't like the idea of taking part in the upcoming Necro-Classic interrogations, but Council Central insisted on it. This would be his first experience with this mysterious and, in many ways, mystical process. Arden wasn't squeamish about anything, but felt that seeing another human being's naked soul without their expressed permission was somehow a violation of their intimate identity. But, in this respect, there was both a need and no alternative available. Both he and Security-Commander Harn Murogan were to interject their minds into the necro-crystal's central matrix and question these unknown gamma-complexes. Harn was a Necro-Classic debriefing specialist with thousands of years of field experience and used to routinely interrogating disincarnate souls. But this wasn't a normal or routine interrogation, so Arden was instructed to join in as an emergency backup. It was also Council Central's intention to witness the proceedings through Ardel and try to determine just who these people were.

"How do we approach this, Harn? I've never been involved in this kind of operation before."

"Getting in is no problem, Arden. It's establishing a communications link with the gamma-units that's tricky. You see, we don't know where these people came from, nor how their system of binary codes works. If they're similar to us, we can work out a simple set of linear symbols to build on, and then go from there. If they're too alien, then we have some problems. That's where Council Central can come in and give us some support. In fact, that's the real reason you're joining me on this problem. The fact you're a Magum ensures that Council Central will know what's happening and possibly give us guidelines to work on."

"I see. By the way, will their state of mind have anything to do with our ability to deal with them? From what I've already seen of

their ordeal of being eaten alive and then dumped out in the void, I suspect they're still pretty traumatized."

"That is a factor, Arden, but it's only a minor problem compared to establishing an understanding of their binary codes. You wouldn't believe how different systems of logic can be, even when the binary codes are nearly the same. When we're able to discover their primary system, it appears to them that we're speaking in their own familiar languages, although we're only arranging binary signals to meet their conditioned processes. They'll imagine they hear our spoken words, while we will both visualize their concepts and simulate their oral symbols in our own language structure. I'll be doing this within myself and will rely on both my training and experience to manipulate the binary symbols. Council Central will aid you in the process."

"I'm not quite sure I know what you just said," Arden smiled, "but it sure sounds good. Your comment about Council Central doing my translating for me answers my next question."

Arden wasn't sure just how he came to be inside the grey-white room with Harn, but the process was almost mystical in its application. The two were seated side-by-side and placed themselves in a deep, meditative state of mind. Arden had done this many times before, but now something was different. When he reached the hidden recess in the depths of his brain . . . the imagined white room with two doors, dark mirror on the wall, and low bench, he continued on and through the second door. Now he was in this mysterious room . . . or was it a structure within the necro-crystal? He was seated behind a wooden table, and on the other side of it, on the opposite wall, there appeared to be a wooden door.

"Where are we, Harn?"

"In the crystal, don't worry about the decor we've constructed, it's a neutral setting by our standards, and hopefully will be to our first subject. It's important that we place them in a setting they can identify with. Hopefully this'll put them at ease so we're able to begin our interrogation without too much resistance. By the way, this gamma-B is from the young female we observed in the quarantine area the other day. I want to find out what really happened to her, so just sit back and observe. Don't speak unless I signal you to, then act as if you're speaking to someone you know well and who's familiar with your language. Council Central will

channel your words through her mind and try to match the binary codes with her own symbols. Okay?"

"It's your show, Harn."

The wooden door opened by itself and a small, naked and frightened looking girl entered, her eyes as round as saucers and her tiny hands shaking nervously. She looked around the strange room, trying to figure out where she was and what was happening. She began to whimper and make little incoherent noises to herself, but stopped when she heard the sound of Harn's voice.

"Please sit down and don't be afraid," Harn's soft voice seemed to permeate the very air. "Don't be afraid, we're friends and only want to help you."

The child-like creature continued to shiver and look around with terrified eyes, but responded by moving slowly over to the wooden chair, on the opposite side of the table from the two men, and haltingly sat down on it. She sat there, not knowing what else to do, and waited for Harn to speak again.

"Now, my dear, can you tell me your name?" Harn toned soothingly.

The girl looked startled for a moment and then confused.

"Can you understand what I'm saying to you, my dear?" Harn modulated his voice in a different tone. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Chuanie." The small voice responded, sounding like a child's lisping.

"Very good, Chuanie," Harn corrected his tone, noting the visual and vocal symbols the girl's mind emitted. "You may call me 'Friend', for I am truly your friend and want to help you."

The little woman looked tearfully into Harn's eyes and pleaded with soft innocent tones. "They took my baby, can you find my baby? Oh please, can you find my baby?"

"Oh, yes indeed, my dear Chuanie. I will find your baby for you. My companion will speak to you until I return with your baby."

A clear image of a child appeared in Arden's mind and he realized that this was her baby. Harn signaled for him to fill in with some questions while a search was made for a gamma-complex that came from a boy-child of that description.

"My name is 'Peace', Chuanie. Friend and I will find your baby for you and bring him here. Will that make you happy?"

The woman's eyes had changed from their terrified state to pleading, and now showed bewilderment. "Who are you? I don't remember you . . . and . . . they . . ." The terror returned to her eyes and she nearly bolted from the chair.

"They are gone now, Chuanie, and you and your baby are safe. Friend will have your little boy brought here for you to hold. You will be together again."

"But how? They . . . they . . ."

"Don't worry. Your little baby is all right . . . you will have him back shortly."

The conversation continued for what seemed like hours to Arden, but after a space of time, the door opened and Harn entered carrying a small boy in his arms. Chuanie was beside herself with tears of joy as Harn bent down and placed the child in her outstretched arms. She clutched him to her breast and rocked back and forth, sobbing and petting his little head.

Arden sat back and watched them for a short time, observing Chuanie as she comforted her child. The effect of the little boy being back with her had a definite calming effect, and it was now obvious that they had gained her confidence.

Harn returned to his chair and began to speak again.

"Everything will be peaceful and good again, Chuanie. Now tell me about your home and all your friends. Just remember when you were a little girl and how you loved your mother. . . ."

Almost as if by magic, Arden's mind registered the girl's memories as if she were reliving her entire life, moment by moment. Harn quickly discovered the key to taming her fear and exacting her complete and trusting cooperation by finding her murdered child and returning him to her. She knew these were truly friends since they returned her little boy to her. Now he triggered her deepest memories and began the process of gamma-release which accompanies all recently deceased human gamma-complexes upon awakening in the ethereal. Arden didn't understand just how this process was actually triggered, nor how it worked, but he could now experience their results. He could see, hear and feel everything through Chuanie's memories, almost as if he were living them with her. Nothing was left out.

Chuanie's world and its inhabitants were beautiful and innocent, reminding Arden of the elves on Meszhiah. Her memories were clear and bright, with happy child-like people who lived in a

garden environment devoid of technological advancements other than simple household implements and toys. After what seemed like years of happy and carefree living, the picture changed to that of people being stolen from their homes by uniformed man-like creatures unknown to them and taken away in large aircraft. From that point on, only interior views of metal walls, thick doors and what appeared to be giant cargo bays filled her memory. Chuanie and her little boy were grabbed from their front yard and taken away. She hadn't seen her husband, Nielan again and it was doubtful that he'd been captured by the alien men.

While confined in the huge cargo bays, they were well-fed and kept clean by their captors, who otherwise ignored them and didn't mistreat them. Then something else happened that changed everything.

The continuous chain of memories moved through Arden's mind, only being interrupted by Harn's intercession to focus on specific details, until it happened. The doors of the cargo bay were flung open and large, dark-uniformed creatures, resembling men, entered and rounded up the frightened people, then herded them out of the bay. Not a word was spoken by the strangers, who knew exactly what they were doing, or their blond, blue-eyed overseers. Chuanie was prodded along, holding her little boy to her breast. Everyone was scared to death as they were herded through a long tube into another ship and along drab metal corridors into a dark, smelly cell block. The doors were slammed behind them and everyone crouched in terror in the shadowy quarters. Only small, dully lit glow bulbs in the center of each room's ceiling gave any light, while stuffy and ill-smelling air was supplied through vents near the dirty metal decks. They were fed a runny gruel that was poured into long metal troughs from a large pipe protruding from the ceiling, and water poured into another trough. The entire setting reminded Arden of a cattle boat, on which poor animals were shipped to primitive markets to be slaughtered under the worst conditions imaginable.

The girl's dark and frightened memories were punctuated by the entry of their captors who grabbed men, women or children and then left without a word. None of those who'd been taken by their captors ever returned. Chuanie's little boy was grabbed away from her and taken in this same manner.

Arden could feel her desperation when her little boy was snatched away from her and she tried to pull the infant back from his captor. He experienced the same terror she felt as she waited with the others; wondering what would happen next.

Caught by the arm, Chuanie was dragged to a large room, her clothing torn off and her hands tied behind her. Then, without any kind of ceremony, she was hauled, naked, into another giant room full of ugly, smelly, black-uniformed creatures greedily eating other living prisoners. Their screams were terrible, but most repulsive and frightening was the grunting and snarling of the savage diners who tore into the living flesh of their victims with ferocious vigor. Chuanie was strapped, face down, to a metal table and immediately set upon by two hungry creatures who chewed into the backs of her thighs like mad dogs . . . she screamed out in terror and agony . . . then everything went black.

Harn was a master of developing both visual and oral information from Chuanie and the others interrogated after her. Although none of the victims noticed much about their surroundings during their captivity, he focused on the most innocuous items and develop a clear picture of what happened to them and a great deal of detailed information about both the slavers and the black-uniformed beasts who used the captives as food. The presence of the blond, blue-eyed officers, who were different from the ferocious beasts, was sure proof that these were creatures belonging to Sargon's Legions of Light. Although the creatures that devoured living human beings were coarse and ugly brutes, they were disciplined and directed by technologically superior beings. Nothing could be gathered about their oral language, but their written symbols were everywhere, especially on doors, bulkheads, and equipment that came into view. Council Central had no record of their presence anywhere in the Ansharim's Proctorates and a check with the Nashramh's Council Central proved to be the same. They were definitely from beyond the rim and were a new wave of invaders with whom no one had as yet come in contact. It was determined that the slavers were in the business of supplying incoming vessels with fresh meat and this is why they were so far out from the rim. The real mystery was where the dead creatures came from. None of the little people had the slightest idea of where their world was, or that they had left it.

If there was any hope of returning the people's gamma-complexes back into their native environment, then they would have to find out where it was. That would be a real problem, and the Corbol wasn't equipped to handle it.

After a long process of indoctrination and counseling, Chuanie and the others who'd been interrogated, were put into a Beriatric sleep until they could be dealt with by the Ansharim's Necro-Classic Authorities. The remaining 240,000 gamma-complexes were recovered and stored, without being awakened, for later processing. Now it was a question of where the strange invaders were going, and how long ago they'd passed this point in space. The only tangible sample of their technology was the synthetic material used to bind the victim's bodies together and to tie their hands behind their backs. Why the prisoners were tied in strings of 1,000 before being ejected into the void was also a mystery.

Once Arden and Harn disengaged themselves from the necro-crystal complex, they debriefed with other members of the crew, including Captain Tod Roun.

"Council Central wants us to scour the area around here for any sign of sub-binary injection or egress. We suspect the vessel was moving tangentially to and along the rim and was describing an arc between two points. Those points being from where they took their prisoners aboard to where they ejected them into the void, and then possibly made a course correction and injected back into the sub-binary. This would explain why the corpses were dumped so far out. Have you gotten a fix on the direction of their drift, Tod?"

"We have a general drift trajectory," the captain answered, pulling at his moustache. "Allowing for both the gravitational pull from the rim stars and the galaxy's rotational momentum, we figure they came from the upper plate, about 10 degrees above the elliptic, and from the direction of ONR364-TB3. Of course that's a broad area, but it's within our capability to search and in the framework of our mission profile."

"Then you have permission to pursue your search in the area of ONR364-TB3, Tod."

"I'll have navigation plot a course trajectory and we can be en route by 15:00 hours."

The White Threads

"Good," Arden nodded, "I'll notify Council Central, Tod. Now we'd better place our markers here so a follow-up ship can find these peoples' bodies."

Chapter 5

Exile

Throughout our tales, beginning in the year 2096-1N1, we have spoken of Sister Kruminah 'Tziah, or Sahlie Lor, who was suspected of being a Jerden infiltrator. This terrible suspicion was finally discovered to be a mistake after a long process of punitive investigative episodes marred her long service in our order . . . a process which continued even after she was proven innocent! This was before her incarceration in Borgdragon Wall with Ruby and our other martyr sisters.

After the destruction of Samael-Borgdragon Estate, Sahlie Lor served in a number of capacities with both our rim fleet and 'Women of the Mission', during which time a number of negative character flaws became evident. In this, she expressed a serious lack of personal growth and maturity resulting from her early experiences with our internal security investigations. Herein something drastic had to be done to force her to grow up. . . .

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The soft purring of hidden machinery vibrated through smooth welded grey metal plates where Solah-nim lay naked, curled up and holding her bare knees, on the cool deck of a cell-like room. She felt numb and disoriented as she tried desperately to recall all that happened to her. She had recently been thawed out from something called cryo-freeze and placed in this metal room that had only a shower head and drain in one corner, and a seat less white water closet in the other. Other than the shower and water closet, there was nothing.

As she lay there shivering, Solah-nim thought about her old mother, Mylah-et, who, because of her advanced age, didn't want

any more children, but had borne her by mistake. At least that was what she'd been told at the nursery school. And then there were those terrifying dreams she couldn't quite place, but over time concluded were actually memories from the time before she was born. There was no other answer. She remembered seeing herself, or at least part of her body which was covered with a grey sort of film, or was it a fabric? Something about the grey covering distressed her and she tried to get it off. But it just clung to her, and then there were those voices . . . yes, the voices.

"You'll learn what real monsters are, my dear. Yes, you will find through hard experience that your ideas about us are entirely wrong."

"You've gone too far with your vile and negative criticism," another voice stated, "and you must learn about something other than our ways. You'll find out what those who truly lack compassion are really like."

"Yes, and you'll tell a different kind of story about us. Oh, yes you will. We have our thin spots, but they're nothing compared to what you'll experience."

And so the hidden voices went on until she suddenly found herself seeing light through different eyes, after being submerged in a new body. Then the voices were gone and she was alone.

Life on the Quon-Ebe-Drouk Confederation's mining colony of QEN-4088D was hard but good, and Solah-nim hadn't any really bad memories of her childhood in the nursery and later in school. When she graduated from primary children's school at 15 years of age, she'd landed a job in the number three pit as an ore loader. It was hard work, but paid well and there were always the other workers who were great to be with. Everybody was robust and happy, and all liked their work. Mining was a profession that got into their blood and gave them all a feeling of belonging.

Just after her 38th birthday, she was promoted to a Level-1 ore sample inspector and transferred to the level 26 lab station on pit number 16. A hefty raise in pay came with the new job, along with the opportunity to acquire a better education during her spare time. Her new apartment was larger and she had money to spare for luxuries she hadn't even thought about before. Everything was steady and her future looked good, if not bright.

Then there was that damned day, exactly six weeks after her promotion, when she had a great date with that hunk, Ilonad-crae,

from the number eight pump station. That afternoon, after work, Solah-nim showered and put on her best casual clothes, two bright red combs in her hair, and even a spot of perfume to spice up the date. She was just about to leave for her rendezvous when she was summoned to the section chief administrator's office by a special messenger. Everything after that was a jumble and she got mixed up when trying to remember what happened. The main thing she couldn't forget, though, was the strange presence of a lean woman dressed in black, who looked tough enough to beat the stuffing out of a whole platoon of miners without even getting winded.

The hard-eyed woman sat behind the chief administrator's desk, although she was clearly not from the mining colony. Her manner of dress and appearance suggested something else, but Solah-nim had no idea what.

The woman sat back and studied her for a long time, then nodded, as if to herself, and spoke.

"Sit down, Solah-nim, we have much to discuss."

"I don't understand," she answered uneasily as she obeyed the order. "Who are you?"

"I'll ask the questions and you will answer them. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, I guess so," Solah-nim answered, wondering what was going on.

Then another tough-looking woman, wearing a grey suit and a holstered gun on her belt, came into the room. Without a word, she stepped over to Solah-nim and looked into each of her eyes through a strange kind of red glass mounted in a metal tube. After examining her eyes, the woman walked behind her and stood there without saying anything.

"Now that we're sure who you really are, we can get along with our business," the woman behind the desk spoke clearly. Then she leaned forward on her elbows, and looked Solah-nim straight in the eyes. "Are you still a lesbian?"

"Huh? What's that?"

"Do you still like to have sex with other women?"

"Nuh . . . no!" she blurted out, her face flushing. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? Do you know who I am? Or, who the woman standing behind you is?"

"No."

"Don't you recognize our uniforms?

"No. I've never seen anything like them before."

"Don't you remember anyone wearing uniforms like this at Borgdragon? Surely you remember your wonderful experiences while you were there?"

Solah-nim shook her head and tried to make sense of what this strange woman was talking about. "No. I don't understand what you're saying."

The woman sat back again and studied Solah-nim before continuing with a different line of questions.

"Do you find that you can think clearly, and your imagination is full of strange and exciting things you can experience as if they were really happening?"

"Yes, I imagine all sorts of adventures about things that I read from books."

"You had a great deal of trouble listening and learning in school, didn't you? Partly because you were always day-dreaming and because you could never quite concentrate on the lessons you were studying, and you'd get a headache when working on math problems . . . isn't that true?"

"Well, yes, I guess so."

"Yes or no?"

"Well . . . uh, yes. But I'm not stupid."

"Who said you were stupid? You can think about all sorts of interesting things, but you have trouble learning what others are teaching. Isn't that right?"

"Well, yes."

The woman behind the desk continued to ask Solah-nim all sorts of personal and often embarrassing questions about herself. Then, without any explanation she stopped.

"It's time we left. Secure the creature."

The grey-uniformed woman grabbed Solah-nim by the arms and lifted her up out of her chair, without any effort, and pushed her against the wall.

"Don't move a muscle, young woman. I don't want to hurt you," she spoke softly.

Solah-nim was both terrified and confused. She hadn't done anything but answer their questions as honestly as she could, and now they were arresting her.

"Are you police?"

The grey-uniformed woman remained silent and attached the ends of a long plastic strap to her ankles and then pulled her arms behind her back and strapped her wrists together.

"Okay, now keep your mouth shut and do what you're told," the other woman ordered, getting up from behind the desk. "Now move!"

The grey-uniformed woman held Solah-nim's arm and led her out, through the now deserted administrative offices, and to a brown tunnel car waiting out in the transit tube. Solah-nim couldn't believe how strong this woman was, and did absolutely nothing to provoke her.

"Into the back seat, now sit still and keep quiet."

The woman in black got in next to her and shut the door. Then she strapped Solah-nim securely to the back seat and placed a blindfold over her eyes. The weight of her body against her wrists hurt like hell, but she kept her mouth shut as instructed.

Everything after that was a mishmash of activity, and she couldn't see what was happening because of the blindfold. After a long drive, she was taken from the tunnel car and led along, for what seemed like forever, and finally delivered to a brightly lit metal room. The blindfold and restraining straps were removed, after which she was stripped of her clothing and subjected to an uncomfortable blue light that made her skin crawl. She was forced to drink thick sweet liquids, then to take a shower in some sort of oily solution. After that she was placed in a metal box and injected with something. Then everything went black.

Now she'd been brought out of cryo-freeze into what seemed to be a different place, but she couldn't really be sure. God, she felt strange. She was all dressed up for a date with Ilonad-crae, and then everything went crazy. This entire affair seemed like a nightmare and she wanted to wake up and be back in her bed at home. But, try as she did, nothing happened and she was still here, on this smooth metal floor, not knowing what would happen next.

Solah-nim was startled awake by the sudden bright light from beyond the opened cell door.

"All right, time to get up and begin the day. Come on, let's move it!"

"Wha . . . what?" she stammered lamely, trying to get her faculties together.

"Come on, get up!"

Struggling to her feet, Solah-nim nearly collapsed. Her leg muscles were stiff and cramped as she put weight on them. Although she was still disoriented, she suspected her cramps were caused by something other than just lying on the floor, possibly the cryo-freeze. After a few moments, she managed to stumble through the open door into the next room.

"The shower's over here. Now make it snappy."

Still a bit dazed, all her muscles aching and almost cramping, Solah-nim stumbled into the shower stall and stood under refreshing streams of warm, foamy water and began to appreciate its therapeutic value. After a few moments, the water shut off and warm jets of air engulfed her entire body, quickly drying her.

"Put on that jumpsuit over there, and those slippers," the woman ordered. It's time for breakfast and your morning workout. Come on, move it!"

Solah-nim obeyed and dressed in the soft paper-like clothing and slippers, then sat down at a table next to the wall. There was a paulpa-bowl containing some kind of cereal, with white liquid on it, four pieces of toasted bread, and a cup of tea. The hot cereal was good and helped calm her nervous stomach, and comfort her aching body. She remained silent and ate the breakfast while her companion stood by watching her closely.

"Your manners of eating are good for our present company, but you will now begin to learn new table manners. Here, let me show you."

The woman took another bowl of cereal, toast and tea from a counter and set them on the table. Then sitting across from Solah-nim, she demonstrated how she wanted it done. Solah-nim obeyed, so not to offend the woman. The manners themselves weren't too different, but the woman, whom she learned was to be addressed only as Seri, insisted she do exactly as shown.

After breakfast, the two walked along a deserted corridor, in which the muffled sound of machinery could be heard behind the walls. After about 30 meters, they entered a gymnasium where Solah-nim was instructed on a set of rigorous exercises that lasted an hour and a half. Her companion, who was to be her instructor in all things, worked out with her and set the pace for her exercises. Then they returned to the room where she'd eaten. Other

than giving her specific instructions, Seri said nothing to her during the entire exercise session.

"You'll be given a physical examination in a few minutes, then we'll begin with your lessons."

"What kind of lessons, and what am I doing here?"

"Lessons in languages of different cultures dominant on part of the world we're transporting you to. Other than that, it's none of your business to ask questions outside of your specific lessons, and you are to discuss nothing with me other than the content of those subjects. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, I guess so."

She took a shower and redressed before the checkup. The physical examination didn't take more than half an hour, and nothing out of the ordinary was found to be wrong with her. Actually, she was in relatively good health, and only had organic symptoms of cryo-freeze which, she was told, would take about a month to correct themselves. After that, she never saw anyone other than Seri for the next seven years. During this time she was assigned a cabin furnished with a single cot, desk, chair, and shower. The cabin was located across from the vault-like cell she'd originally been placed in. She spent all of her time locked in her private room, except when exercising, eating, or receiving specific lessons from Seri. The only memorable thing about her room, other than her long hours of studying there, was the soft and lovely music played over the wall-mounted comm-link each evening for an hour before lights-out. Seri always dealt with her at arm's length, although she was patient and even kind when teaching the required subjects. It seemed to Solah-nim that Seri was normally a warm and friendly person, but didn't want to get too close for some undisclosed reason that wasn't really personal.

Each day was a carbon copy of all the others, beginning with her breakfast and morning exercise session, then a long routine of special language lessons, mathematics, primitive cultural values, manners, geography, survival techniques, and many other subjects.

During the day, Seri never spoke in Galactic Common, but used one of the four languages Solah-nim was studying. After her formal lessons, she would work out for an hour and a half in the gymnasium again after dinner, and then study her assignments alone until lights out.

For study, she had crystal recording discs for each lesson. All of the subjects were relatively easy, with the exception of languages and mathematics, which she had a great deal of trouble digesting. Her oral command of the simplest language was marginal at best. Try as she might, she couldn't learn to think in any of them. She'd always relate the alien grammar to Galactic Common before haltingly translating it into the local vernacular. Otherwise, she memorized short phrases that would pass for a beginner. She could read the various languages much better than she could speak them, since they were visual and made sense, if she had time to reason them out. By the time she was ready to off-load at the destination planet, Solah-nim was barely ready to make the transition, although she had no choice in the matter.

She was brought before a tough-looking woman in a black uniform with two small silver triangles on her stiff, upright collar indicating some sort of rank. She sat behind her polished metal desk and looked at Solah-nim as if she were some sort of animal.

"You will be off-loaded from this vessel and transported to the planet below. You will be given clothing, identification documents, and letters of introduction when you arrive on the surface. You will sign here for the items."

"But I don't know what items I'm signing for, and I don't know what language this is," Solah-nim protested.

"Just sign, or we'll send you down without supplies."

Solah-nim signed her name on the strange document, in Galactic Common, then laid the pen down.

"You won't have any trouble adjusting to your new life," the black-uniformed woman continued, looking her straight in the eyes. "We know all about you . . . you're well-practiced at lying, cheating, and stealing . . . you'll do all right. Now get out of my sight!"

Solah-nim was dressed in a different kind of paper jumpsuit with high shoes that seemed fragile and likely to dissolve if they got wet. In fact, that's just what would happen if the soft materials were exposed to water. Her wrists were tied together in front of her with a plastic strap, and she was then blindfolded. She was escorted to another location quite far away from the woman's desk and strapped into a hard seat without anyone saying a word to her. Seri, her instructor of seven years, hadn't visited her that morning and only the grey-uniformed people, who never spoke,

prepared her for her uncertain journey. After exposing her to the uncomfortable blue light treatment, they inoculated her with something, then proceeded with the transfer.

Sitting uncomfortably blindfolded and strapped to the metal seat, Solah-nim listened to the many sounds around her and tried to figure out what was happening. She could hear a number of other people talking quietly together somewhere in front of her and, after a while, could count exactly 12 different voices. It was obvious, from the little she could hear, that they were being delivered to the same place she was, only for a much different reason. They all appeared to know one another and were discussing technical problems they expected to encounter when they reached the planetary surface. It seemed they were all going down to a very primitive planet where murder and violence were commonplace.

"I wonder who she is?" one of the voices, a man's, asked softly.

"I don't know," another answered, "but from all appearances, she's a condemned criminal or they wouldn't have her blindfolded and her wrists strapped together."

"Well, whoever she is," the first voice continued, "I hope things go well for her. This is certainly no place to be put into exile. It's more like being sentenced to hell."

"We're being assigned there too, so we need good fortune on our side as well."

"But we have each other to rely on. I don't think she has, and I feel sorry for her. I wish I could offer some encouragement, but the security people positively refuse to let us speak to her."

"I know. We'd better get ready for our departure. Do we have any. . . ."

A slight difference in the feeling of movement, almost like falling, accompanied by a different kind of sound around her, besides the hum of hidden machinery, alerted Solah-nim that they were on their way down to the planet's surface. She knew she was on a vessel of some kind that would take her down to the planet from a larger ship; she had been on a space ship all of this time without really knowing it. The craft bumped and vibrated as it got closer to the surface and then seemed to stop altogether. The sounds of the 12 other passengers told her they were getting off, although she couldn't tell where. Then, after a short time, the craft began to vibrate and felt like it was moving again.

It was pitch dark and terribly cold outside as Solah-nim was led out of the grounded craft and onto rough ground. Her blindfold was removed just before being led out of the open hatch and still she couldn't see anything. Once out-side, the plastic strap holding her wrists was cut and her hands were free.

"Take her in there," a man's voice sounded in the dark. He was speaking one of the strange languages she learned while in transit, although it sounded different than Seri or the recording discs she'd studied. It was obviously one of the many dialects they'd discussed.

"Come on, this way," another man's voice spoke harshly as rough hands pushed her toward a place unseen.

A wax candle was lit and offered scant light to see by, but enough for Solah-nim to recognize the dark shapes of four large men in the ice cold room. Outside, she heard the humming of the craft fade into the distance. Now she was truly alone in a strange land.

"Put these clothes on, now!" the man who'd pushed her into the room ordered. "Make it fast!"

She could see the shapes of large weapons which she recognized as being rifles of the kind she'd been briefed on. It was obvious that these men meant business, whatever their business was, and expected her to obey without question. The clothes were laid out on the earthen floor and she reluctantly removed her paper clothing and donned the coarse cloth garments beginning with the underwear and finishing with a bulky overcoat and hat. The clothing was designed for a man, and the stiff boots felt a bit too large, but not uncomfortable.

"Here," someone said, pushing a heavy cloth bag into her hands. "Now get out of here."

Solah-nim was pushed out of the door, as the dim candle flickered out, and guided along the rough ground to what seemed like a flat area. After about an hour of stumbling along, the party stopped and she could just make out the dim line of nearby trees ahead of her as the morning sun approached the horizon.

"Now march straight ahead for 200 paces before you do anything and don't look back," another man's low hoarse voice sounded behind her. "If you stop or look back, I'll shoot you down." The sound of the bolt of his rifle announced he was putting a round of ammunition into it, in readiness to fire. "Now move!"

Solah-nim obeyed him without answering and counted off 200 paces, then walked another 300 before stopping to rest. After a long wait, she looked back along the deserted road she'd been walking along, and could see nothing other than the deserted countryside. The early morning sun hadn't risen above the horizon yet, but there was now enough light to see for some distance.

Opening the heavy cloth bag, Solah-nim found a leather wallet with her identification papers in it. There was a strange-looking photograph of her in clothing she'd never worn, and documents in the native language announcing that her name was Natina Calinis of Riga. There was a sum of paper money and four gold coins, and several letters of introduction to persons in Gatchina and St. Petersburg. Other than that, there were no maps or other information to help her out; she would have to rely on her memory of her geography lessons from this point on. The heavy bag also contained several changes of women's clothing, shoes, some toilet articles, a knife and fork, two loaves of bread and a large sausage. Other than that, she had nothing to defend herself with, except a brief knowledge of the place and her wits. Seri and the woman at the desk told her that she should have no trouble here since she was well-practiced in deception, lying and cheating. Why she'd said this, Solah-nim couldn't figure out, but then everything that had happened to her since being arrested was insane anyway.

Closing the heavy bag, Solah-nim, or Natina Calinis, as she would now call herself, got up and began walking along the road to the north and east. The sun was now peeking over the south-eastern horizon and the landscape around her, although cold and frosty, was beautiful to look at. The land on both sides of the road had been harvested, and cut-off stalks of some kind of plants covered the dark earth. There were trees stretching off into the distance where she could see the tops of distant buildings. These proved to be the outskirts of a town known as Gatchina her first stop on the way to another city, further north, called St. Petersburg.

She walked slowly along the narrow road with deep ruts, and kept her eyes peeled for any approaching humans, or other kinds of creatures. Something appeared in the distance behind her, and she quickly made for a grove of trees and low brush about a hundred meters along the road ahead of her.

There were 20 horsemen with gaudy-looking uniforms, and strange hats on their heads, cantering along the road on huge animals called horses. As she lay hidden in the brush, she could tell they were alert and appeared to be searching for something or someone. Natina hugged the ground and tried to make herself as inconspicuous as possible as the mounted men came closer, their swords and other gear rattling in the clear morning air. She recognized their uniforms as being those of Hussars, whom she'd been told were cruel and rapacious men to be avoided at all costs.

Natina's immediate goal was an address in Gatchina, which must be the town just ahead of her, or somewhere just beyond. At least the letters indicated that Gatchina would be the first town she would encounter and she was to remain there until she moved out on her own. Considering how little she knew about this cold, frightening planet and its violent society, Natina was determined to make directly for this place immediately. Fortunately, the people who planned her itinerary had thought these things out and she was placed on a road leading directly past the residence she was looking for. It was only by absolute luck, as she found out later, that she didn't encounter any Tzarist secret police or military people who were scouring the countryside for subversives and revolutionary elements. Within the next 15 hours, Natina walked nearly 30 kilometers and, by sheer accident, discovered the building she was looking for.

It was dark again and Natina found herself walking through the outskirts of the town she'd seen in the distance all day. She hadn't seen any signposts, or other indicators, to identify the darkened community, and there were only a few lights showing through the glass-like windows of nearby buildings. Her main concern now was the strange and dangerous-looking creatures she recognized as being dogs. There were a pack of them trailing her as if she were some kind of prey. Out of fear and desperation, she walked to the main door of a two-story building and knocked on it.

"What do you want?" a voice from the other side of the door demanded after she'd knocked repeatedly for about ten minutes.

"I have become lost and wish to ask directions!" she cried out, as the dark forms inched closer.

"Who are you?" the voice asked, with a note of suspicion.

"My name is Natina Calinis, and I have come from Riga," she stammered. The dark animals were now only a few meters away and looked like they were about to attack.

"Do you have a letter or some form of identification?" the voice asked, now somewhat more urgently.

"Yes, I have both!"

The door opened suddenly and a short man, holding a large revolver, motioned her in, then closed it behind her.

"Let me see your letter and identification," he demanded.

Natina fumbled in her wallet and the man grabbed it away from her.

"Don't move, or I'll shoot," he warned her, as he rummaged through the wallet. Removing the three letters, he opened each and read it. Then he checked her other identification papers.

"You have come to the right place, Natina Calinis," he bowed and smiled, "and you have made good time."

Natina really couldn't believe her good fortune until he handed her wallet and papers back, and his wife, Olga, came into the vestibule and welcomed her.

"We don't normally allow strangers to enter our house, especially at night. But then, we were told you were to be expected any time and so we took the chance. You may stay here for a few days, then Yakkov will take you to another place where you can be employed for awhile. Do you like children?"

Both Yakkov and Olga were friendly, but cautiously reserved about dealing with their foreign guest. She was ushered into the kitchen, the only warm room in the house, and given a cup of hot tea.

"Have you eaten today, my dear?" Olga asked as she poured the tea.

"Yes, I have. I do not need anything to eat," Natina spoke slowly, struggling with the difficult language. "Thank you for your concern."

"Was your journey eventful, Natina?" Olga continued, trying to size up the smaller woman.

"No it wasn't really. I hid from some men on horses. I think they are called Hussars. Other than that, I walked alone and saw no one until I arrived here."

"Didn't you talk to anyone in Kikerino or Volosovo? There is a police station at Volosovo," Olga pressed.

Natina looked confused and shook her head. "I didn't see anyone on the road except for the men with red coats and large black hats on their heads."

"But, you did travel on the road from Narva, didn't you?"

"I guess so, but I do not know anything about these places, other than their names. I am from Riga which is much farther away."

"So your papers say," Olga smiled. "You are truly a stranger then. We must protect you from harm since you are new here and can run afoul of the Tzar's secret police. They will think you a spy and will hurt you. Yakkov, I think you'd better tell Natina something about what is going on."

"Yes. I agree," he spoke softly, placing his teacup on the table.

The three talked together for about an hour, during which Natina came to understand that times were becoming difficult for Yakkov and his wife who might be considered subversives because they befriended some Jews in a village to the south of them. The administration of the new Tzar, Alexander III, was anti-Semitic and there was a real threat of pogroms, which Yakkov explained were government-sanctioned atrocities against alien peoples such as the Jews, as well as religious dissenters like Protestants and Roman Catholics. There was also, he added, movement towards revolution in the land led by a secret society, named 'Land and Liberty', and another party which called itself the 'People's Will'. The latter party, who were out-and-out terrorists, had blown up Tzar Alexander II with a bomb by the banks of Catherine Canal in St. Petersburg, a year earlier. The police were cracking down on anyone who appeared to be in sympathy with the stalwarts who opposed them. Pogroms against the Jews had already begun down in the Ukraine, which was part of the Pale of Settlement.

Natina didn't understand what he was talking about, but politely nodded her head as if in agreement with his words.

"In a couple of days, I'm traveling north to St. Petersburg on my regular business," Yakkov spoke seriously, "and you'll accompany me as my daughter. I'll deliver you to the house of a German family by the name of Timpe, where you will be employed as a housekeeper and a governess. That is, you'll be required to take care of the family's three children, one of whom is still an infant. You will be wise to never speak to the man, except for answering direct questions. He is a German military officer who has been

assigned to St. Petersburg posing as a banker. Beyond this, I know nothing about him. His wife will be your main contact, but you are to discuss nothing personal with her. If there is anything to say, she will let you know. Otherwise, it's important for you to remain silent and do your job well. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

They gave her a room on the second floor of the wooden structure, with a soft bed and single table, and she was allowed to rest alone until the following morning. Natina removed all but her underclothing and slipped under thick woolen blankets, then snuffed out a single candle lighting her room. It was pitch dark, but she felt safe here with her strange hosts, neither of whom seemed threatening despite the large revolver Yakkov carried. The promise of a permanent situation in a larger town appealed to her and taking care of small children gave her a feeling of security for the time being. There was so much she didn't understand about this strange world, and it would take a long time before she could be comfortable here.

The trip to St. Petersburg took 12 hours in Yakkov's horse-drawn wagon, although the distance traveled wasn't more than 50 kilometers of unobstructed road. The weather was icy cold, and oddly there wasn't a lot of traffic on the road, other than wagons loaded with produce destined for St. Petersburg's markets. This lack of public travel, Yakkov explained, was due to two factors: There wasn't much produce in the immediate area to be shipped at this time of year, and second, Hussars and police were arresting anyone who didn't have proper business on the road. There were a number of rumors going around that the Tzar, Alexander III, was tightening up all of the reforms his father, Tzar Alexander II, had initiated before his death. People were just waiting to see what was happening before sticking their necks out.

Apparently Yakkov traveled this road regularly, carrying eggs and other farm products to the city for a local merchant. The Hussars ignored him completely while paying special attention to anyone else they thought looked suspicious. Then they would stop the poor wretch and make him unload his wagon, and prove he had legitimate business in St. Petersburg.

It was seven in the afternoon and already dark when they arrived at their destination, a large stone building just east of the Warsaw Station and south of Obudnyy canal on a street named

'Ligovskiy'. Actually, all of the buildings looked the same to her. Yakkov, though, knew exactly where he was going.

"You get out here, Natina. I'll wait until you're accepted by the lady of the house. She'll recognize my wagon parked here and will let you in. Give her the letter addressed to Frau Timpe."

With this, Natina dismounted from the wagon and Yakkov handed her bag down to her.

"Good luck, my dear," he spoke seriously, "whoever you really are, I wish you the best."

"Thank you. I wish you the best, also."

Natina had just reached the large wooden door, with ornate glass windows in it, when it opened before her.

"Your name, please?" the broad-shouldered woman's strangely harsh voice rang out. "What is your name, young woman?"

"Natina Calinis, and I have a letter for Frau Timpe."

"I am Frau Timpe. Give me the letter."

Natina handed her the folded letter, which was snatched out of her hand and read without so much as an acknowledgement. The woman looked up at her and then back at the paper, and then back up again.

"Have you any other identification, young woman?"

Natina handed her other documents to Frau Timpe, who studied them carefully, again in silence. Then she stared directly into Natina's eyes and thought for a long moment.

"When did you arrive here?"

"Three days ago, Frau Timpe. I came from Riga and arrived at Gatchina three days ago."

Looking straight past Natina, out into the darkened street, the woman nodded to Yakkov and then gestured for her to enter, closing the door behind them.

"You'll be employed as a housekeeper and governess for my children. You will never speak to my husband unless he addresses you personally. Then you will answer him briefly and accurately. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Frau Timpe."

"Now come with me."

Natina was led to a bedroom at the rear of the building and instructed to leave her greatcoat and possessions there. Then Frau Timpe instructed her on her new duties.

"You will be supplied with a wardrobe of servant's clothing, the cost of which will be deducted from your pay. You will take your meals with the children and keep to yourself when not working. I am not in the habit of employing foreign servants, but have instructions concerning you. You will remain in my service until I return to Germany, where you will accompany me, and then you will be assigned to another position. That is all I have to say to you, Natina Calinis, or whatever your name is. You will remain in your room until tomorrow morning when you will be instructed on the details of your job."

With this, she left Natina alone in her new bedroom. As brisk and abrupt as Frau Timpe seemed to be, she was always kind and considerate to everyone, including Natina. In fact, it appeared that her briskness was a defense mechanism meant to maintain her privacy.

The following morning when Natina was introduced to the children, she was just as formal with them, introducing their new governess only as Fraulein Calinis.

The short period that Natina remained with the Timpes in St. Petersburg was a time of fuzzy memories and a great deal of confusion. Only Christina, a chunky child of five years, was old enough to do anything other than toddle and sleep. All three children, Christina and two boys, Karl and Hans, were quite homely, otherwise they were easy to please. Christina, although dour-looking, had a bright smile and took an instant liking to her new governess whom she followed everywhere and shared all of her little life with. She loved to tell Natina all about the important things she thought about and was a bright spot in this otherwise lonely experience on this strange world.

Herr Timpe, a balding, middle-aged man, walked and sat like a ramrod and never smiled. When Natina was introduced to him, he questioned her and deduced that she was a low grade moron. He wondered why his wife had seen fit to employ her. It became clear that Frau Timpe ruled the household with an iron hand, and Herr Timpe was only concerned with his business outside the house. Thus, Frau Timpe made her own decisions without any comments or objections from her husband.

The Timpes weren't only frugal in every respect; they also shunned all social contact with their Russian neighbors. Their only guests were other Germans who came and went regularly,

although Natina never met any of them. She was relegated to the back of the house with the children, while the adults discussed important matters in the living room. Only the kitchen and living room were ever heated, while the rest of the building remained ice cold in the winter.

Although the building appeared to be above average, there was no running water or inside plumbing. The fact that these people were satisfied with such primitive conditions really astounded Natina. In fact, she wasn't aware that there was such a thing as indoor plumbing until she finally reached Germany, where the better structures were equipped with modern conveniences.

It had only been a short time, about two months, and the winter snow began to fall, when Herr Timpe was recalled to his home city, Hamburg. The trip across the Gulf of Finland to the port town of 'Slite' on the island of Gotland, in the Baltic Sea, was unforgettable because of the terrible weather and primitive conditions on the steamer. Natina saw the grand structures of St. Petersburg only once during her entire stay in the city, and that was through the carriage window when the family left the city. They boarded a German ship at Slite and sailed to 'Ronne' on Bornholm Island and from there to Lubeck on the northern German coast. Natina was seasick all the way, as were the children. There wasn't anything to see up on deck, since the weather was foul and freezing, so she remained below and tended the sick children.

Leaving St. Petersburg was relatively simple. Natina was accompanying a German family that claimed they were returning to the city in three months time. Why they made this claim wasn't clear to her and she never asked. Since her spoken Russian was so limited, the customs officials believed Natina was actually from Riga and fluent only in her native language.

Upon arrival in Lubeck, the customs inspection was far more thorough, and Herr Timpe had to sign an affidavit that she was in his employ and would be returning to her native land in six months. The portly little man signed the documents without comment, and continued through the rest of the journey without speaking about the matter. It seemed that this mustached German officer, Hauptman Timpe, was willing to go a long way to accommodate his wife, and Natina began to wonder just who this stern, unsmiling woman really was.

The family boarded a train that took them to a station near Hamburg, where it stopped for half an hour, and then continued to the city. Natina and Christina spent the entire trip looking out small windows at the passing landscape which was both orderly and darkly beautiful, even though the sky was overcast and there were patches of snow on the ground. Karl and Hans were exhausted from the rough voyage across the Baltic Sea and slept soundly.

Natina never saw the Timpes' home in Hamburg, since she was put on another train going north to Bremerhaven without so much as a warning or a chance to say good-bye to the children. Frau Timpe personally escorted her to the other train and gave her instructions once they arrived at the car she was to ride on.

"Do you see that woman, wearing the grey hat and coat, sitting next to the window?"

"Yes I do, Frau Timpe."

"Good. You will board this train now and go to her. You will ask if the seat next to her is let, and she will respond by asking if you are from Riga. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But where are you sending me, Frau Timpe?"

"She will tell you all you need to know. She has your ticket and will employ you from now on. Good day."

With this, Frau Timpe turned and walked away without looking back. Natina didn't know what to do, so she followed Frau Timpe's instructions, picking up her two bags and boarding the railroad car.

"Excuse me," she spoke haltingly to the woman in the gray hat and coat, "but is this seat let?"

"Your German isn't very good, young lady. Are you from Riga?" the pudgy looking woman spoke out in a high-pitched voice.

"Yes, I am."

The woman moved away from the window and seated herself next to the aisle, motioning for Natina to take her former place. "You will enjoy the view better here, no?"

"Thank you. My name is Natina Calinis and I have just arrived here. I'm afraid my German isn't very good, but I hope to improve."

"You will, Fraulein Calinis. I am Frau Krause and I have your ticket to Bremerhaven. We will speak about your employment when we arrive at our destination. Now, sit back and enjoy the scenery. The train will be leaving shortly."

Natina sat back and looked out the window at the bustling station and wondered how Christina was taking their sudden separation. She already missed the little girl, and found there were tears in her eyes when she thought about the child. Karl and Hans were lovely children too, but were too young to have formed personalities she could relate to. Christina was different. She had so much enthusiasm and affection, that Natina almost felt like she was her real mother. Now it was all over. Who knew what lay ahead?

Bremerhaven was a cold, grey seaport on the North Sea, just northeast of the mouth of the Weser River. The two women walked from the train station to a two-story hotel three blocks from the docks. Natina learned this was a seaman's hotel and she was to be its only maid. Frau Krause, the proprietress and cook, explained that her former maid had retired five months earlier.

"You are welcome here, Natina Calinis," she smiled when they entered the building. "I had to close down for the morning because there wasn't anyone to stand in for me. I've been doing all the jobs myself and really need your help. You are a good worker, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm a good worker, but I don't know anything about being a maid."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'll show you how to do everything," Frau Krause laughed. "It will be nice to have a young woman working with me. You aren't promiscuous, are you?"

"I don't understand, Frau Krause."

"You don't roll in bed with strange men, you know. You have good morals, don't you?"

"Yes. I have good morals. I haven't ever been with a man before."

"Never?"

"No, never."

"That's good. I don't want to have any problems with the police. Especially since you're a foreigner and not really in this country legally."

"What does that mean? I came here with Frau Timpe and passed through customs with her family. Herr Timpe signed some papers, speaking for me."

"Yes. But according to the papers, you are to stay with the Timpes and are to return to Russia in six months time. Now that

you're here, the situation is different. I'll have your papers corrected later, but we'll have to wait for awhile before I can do anything. Just do your job and don't talk to the customers, except in the course of your duties, and everything will be fine."

Working with Helen Krause was hard, but Natina felt secure. She was required to make up the beds, clean halls, rooms and water closets, and do the laundry. In addition, she took charge of the registration counter during the day, and helped serve meals in the dining room each evening. Her employer was a witty and generous woman, also an employee like herself. The hotel belonged to a merchant in Hamburg, who took most of the proceeds, leaving little for the two women who operated his business. The men who rented the rooms were a rough lot but well-behaved, possibly because the police were always checking the building to ensure that no laws were violated.

Through one policeman, Frau Krause had Natina's papers altered. For a fee, he had documents issued identifying her as a Latvian woman who had worked on a German steamship, and was allowed to take up residence in Bremerhaven to work in the hotel. The woman, whose papers Natina's name and photograph were being entered on, had jumped ship and was now a prostitute in Hamburg under an assumed name. Just how the documents were altered, and Natina's name imposed on them, remained a mystery to her. Whatever the case, she felt secure now and began to enjoy the windblown seaport.

When she wasn't working on Sunday mornings, Natina took long walks around the city and browsed through book shops and cafes. She especially liked to stroll along the shore north of town and watch the steamships making their way out into the North Sea and off to foreign lands. Life here was relatively peaceful and happy until the Great War turned everything upside down.

Police activity increased as the Kriegsmarine expanded their facilities in the area. Natina never left the hotel during the entire period of conflict for fear of being questioned about her identity. It was obvious, from her appearance, that she wasn't German and as long as she kept out of sight, the police took no interest in her. Frau Krause told her that she looked Jewish, and Jews weren't trusted by the Germans.

Beyond the regular food shortages, which Frau Krause always seemed to circumvent, not much happened in the hotel except for

the lively conversations of their guests. Outside, though, there was always a flurry of activity as ships came and went through mined waters, and hard-bitten sailors passed on to their duty assignments.

Then, one day the war was over, and shortly after that the economy collapsed. Both Helen Krause and Natina remained at their jobs, but without any pay other than room and board. Even with this, they considered themselves lucky since their employer, who was well-situated, kept the hotel open despite the fantastic inflation. Thus the two women survived that terrible period until the black legions appeared in their midst.

* * *

Solah-nim, and the people she arrived with, weren't the only ones assigned to this hostile world . . . no, not by a long sight. There was an entire network of long-term colonists along with special observers . . . one of whom was Telakin 'Mesziah.

07:30-11 NASHIM 1571-8N5

The lovely girl sat across the table from Telly smiling sweetly and appraising him with her large blue eyes.

"I pictured you as being a lot younger, Gerry, and a lot slimmer."

"Now where did you get that kind of idea, my dear? I've been stationed here for a long time, or haven't you been told?"

"We weren't given any specific facts about you or any of the others, Gerry, only brief descriptions."

"I see. You say your name is Irma Lansing, right?"

"Yes. I have my passport and other identification papers if you wish to see them."

"In this country, you don't show anybody your identification papers, Irma. The United States doesn't treat its citizens like the Europeans do. I'll help you adjust to this society for a few months, before I return to France. My friend Tina will let you stay in her house until we can find suitable quarters for you. Now about the correspondence you have for me, may I have them?"

"I'm to give them to you orally, Gerry, since they're sensitive. First, there is a special messenger being sent here in the next 10 or 15 years, just when we don't know, but her mission is extremely

important. Her identity and all other details are being kept secret. I'm instructed to say that you'll know her when she arrives and makes contact with you. Second, there's a woman by the name of Natina Calinis, whom you are to check up on when you return to Europe. Hopefully you'll be able to make your initial check within the next 10 years. She's presently living in the German port city of Bremerhaven. All I know about her is that she's bound in a special grey-shield shroud and is to be told nothing about her origins. You're just to get to know her and keep track of her movements until notified otherwise. Your contact in Bremerhaven is a woman named Helen Krause and she runs a small hotel near the docks. That's about it, Gerry."

"A grey-shield, I wonder why anyone would be stuck on this rock with that kind of handicap?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but I think she came here on the same lighter as my group did. There was a blindfolded woman, with her hands strapped together, on our lighter, possibly a criminal or something like that."

"Well then, I'll make contact with both her and Helen Krause in a few years. Whatever the woman's problem is, I'm not going to compound it."

Chapter 6

Raider

We return to Sister Jennanine 'Meszhia', now a security operative, on an allied command station somewhere on the outer rim. Herein we learn something of her fortitude and special talents . . . and something more. . . .

18:21-03 DEMIN 1580-8N5

One must never become completely dependent upon machines, nor cease to double-check their functions, no matter how complex or failsafe. Machines are strictly temporal units and subject to the anomalies of physical change. Statistically, machines may operate within acceptable limits 99.99 percent of the time, but in interstellar travel, that remaining fraction of a percent is crucial. In combat, anything less than 100 percent is unacceptable.

Delta and gamma sensors are designed to scan fixed spots in the void for signs of unaccountable differences. The technician's job is to watch the machine watching that spot in the void and ensure that it does its job 100 percent of the time.

On the Galactic Common Confederation scoutship 'Ranger', there are 800 delta-gamma scanners in operation at all times. There are 800 biological operators watching them at all times. There are three duty shifts per day requiring 2,400 operators and 120 supervisory personnel, one half of which is male, with the other half being female. The total complement of the Ranger is 4,215 officers and crew.

In contrast to our allies, it might be noted, Nashramh scout destroyers have a maximum of 35 officers and crew, while their

Class II scout freighters have a maximum complement of 468 officers and crew, and 500 passengers.

Senior Grid Tracking Specialist Tounfah B'Tziah, of the Ranger's X-7 tracking group, had just completed the third circuit in her in-line search patterns of D-Sector without any sign of a disturbance in the gamma field, when the first hint of intruder activity began to form. It began with a minor movement on a low grade delta indicator, which dropped below zero for a fraction of a second, and then the telltale gamma-track appeared momentarily as a small blip on the D-Sector gridscreen. The negative indication and gamma-track were the signature of a shell masking field that leaked past the intruder's cloaking screen. Nothing was indicated where something should have been. The low grade delta indicator returned to its normal value range, but the signal drop was recorded faithfully on the duty log plot and the automatic combat alarm system placed on alert.

Although the automatic search systems were already probing for the intruder, Tounfah pressed the backup combat-alert alarm, notifying her supervisor of the problem. Then she began actuating her manual S.A.S. recheck system, locking it onto the Search Area Zoning Scanner which originally intercepted the incoming signal. The signal drop had emanated from a distant spot in starfields about 39,000 light years from the G.C.C. scoutship and sensed on a sub-binary sensory system that transcended the speed of temporal light by a factor of 250,000 to one. The intruder had passed through a gaseous cloud, identified on the star charts as 'B-AARX202', in the Ansharim Proctorate's 'Antor V system, which Tounfah suspected was the cause of the delta signal leak. She mused and hummed, "so, even they make mistakes."

Now the deadly search and destroy process would begin when the inevitable follow-up of gamma and delta tracks emerged from Antor V's wispy and the nebulous cloud.

Tounfah began to feel the gnawing fear that combat out in the void carried with it . . . a death that was unlike dying on a planetary surface, where there was a community of familiar souls with whom you reflected awhile before reincorporating into a new body. Here, if the ship sustained a direct hit, everything would be reduced to sub-atomic particles . . . and then that dreaded isolation in the endless void. The chance of rescue under such extreme circumstances was, at best, remote and even then if it did

occur, would take thousands of years. She feared, most of all, the prospect of remaining frozen in lonely isolation out between the stars, spending eternity alone with only aching memories of past realities.

This happened to her once before and she couldn't forget the frozen emptiness of the endless void and waiting, waiting, waiting. Tounfah remembered awakening alone in that strange place which she couldn't describe, and then after a fuzzy process of walking along silent corridors, being debriefed by her unknown rescuers.

Then there was always her irrational fear that the black enemy would retrieve her soul and she'd be lost forever from her comrades. Did the enemy actually hunt for and retrieve human souls? This she didn't know, and there wasn't any evidence that they could do so. No matter what the facts were, she didn't want to find out.

Tracks appeared on the D-Sector gridscreen as both gamma and delta bank indicators came alive with the new impulse. Tounfah actuated the Supervisory Call Alarm, alerting Lieutenant Marcoe, her immediate supervisor for backup analysis.

"That is definitely an intruder's track," she hummed.

X-7 section chief, Junior Lieutenant Juat Marcoe, was studying her section's log plot when the first intruder alarm from Grid Tracking Specialist B'Tziah sounded. She alerted Captain Jergen of the alert and, after a few moments, B'Tziah's backup call came in. Juat reached for the comm-link selector switch and pressed it.

"What've you got, Tounfah?"

The G.C.C. Ranger and two other scoutships, the 'Anwal' and 'Triscut', were detached from the XXIVth Battle Squadron to investigate the short-lived delta signal that occurred two months earlier. Now the three vessels were entering their seventh, and last phase of temporal injection and were to surface in rim space in two minutes. The three warships moved in an inverted V formation with the Ranger bringing up the rear.

Captain Filom Jergen studied his forward gridscreen, waiting for the moment of surfacing when his cloaking system would automatically activate. The ship's battle shields were extended to full range as a precaution against any surprises from the enemy who were suspected to be operating in the immediate area. He wondered if this was an enemy warship, or one of the many cargo

vessels supplying his outer rim penetration groups. If it was the latter, there wouldn't be much chance of encountering trouble, but, if it were otherwise. . . .

All three scoutships entered the temporal grid within seconds of one another and before their cloaking systems came into effect both the Anwal and Triscut were blown into atoms, the detonations lighting up space for a brief moment, revealing the giant black battle cruiser they'd surfaced next to. All three had broken into temporal space less than 1,000 kilometers from where the battle cruiser, 'Sargon's Love', was waiting patiently for their arrival.

"Drop now!" Jergen bellowed as a bright flash lit up his defensive shields. The enemy missed with his first shot and the Ranger managed to drop into the first sub-binary plate before another could be fired. It was standard policy for G.C.C. scoutships to have their sub-binary drives primed for immediate reinsertion whenever they surfaced into a suspected hostile situation. Split-second timing saved the Ranger from sure destruction. Communications was transmitting an emergency signal before the captain's order reached them, and the brief message was released before the enemy's jamming equipment came into full effect. Now the Ranger was running for her life with a superior enemy vessel in hot pursuit.

* * *

The enemy, we have discovered over thousands of years, are a relentless and merciless lot in both their planning and battle tactics, not understanding fear of death quite as we do. . . .

Alnar worked slowly through his primary control batteries, methodically checking each detail for perfect alignment with central directives. It had been 61 duty shifts since initial contact with the G.C.C. Battle Squadron's outlying picket ships, and only a partial shift since the brief skirmish that destroyed two of their scoutships and sent one dodging in and out of the sub-spec in a vain attempt to escape. Their little plan to bait the enemy squadron was only a partial success, since the inferior creatures chose to send scoutships to check a masking field leak, registered on ionic clouds the Sargon's Love had passed through. Well, the G.C.C. squadron might escape for the moment, but not the fleeing scoutship.

The Sargon's Love dispatched two long-range expendo-fighters piloted by special Colmer officers and 300 Argonite technicians to track down the enemy vessel. Alnar's ship was easily moving in on the inferior craft and would soon isolate it and reduce it to atoms. The only question that bothered him was whether the vessel's transmission beam was jammed in time.

Thus far, no discernable movement had been detected in the G.C.C.'s Battle Squadron, now only 38,000 light years distant. Alnar looked forward to the impending conflict. A fleet action was always stimulating, even with an inferior opponent. Little did the fools know that Sargon's legions had penetrated their feeble defenses, planting numerous Jerden spies on their ships. One of their primary defense headquarters, which orbited a remote and uncharted planet, was also infiltrated. Cloaking devices mean nothing when a homing signal is being sent out through it as part of its energy source. This little action against the fleeing scoutship would be concluded shortly and the pursuit of larger game begun in earnest.

Twenty-two hours had elapsed since Captain Filom Jergen reentered the sub-binary and his distress signal was transmitted to Sub-Com Fleet. He'd been zig-zagging in and out of different sub-binary plate levels in a random pattern and reversed his course twice. There was still a narrow chance he would escape enemy pursuit. If not, there'd be a hell of a fight.

The Sargon's Love moved in a straight-line trajectory along the axis of the Ranger's escape path. High-speed tracking complexes fed back instant location data, as the smaller craft darted in and out of the sub-spec planes, and statistical readouts determined the course of the pursuing ship. Even the smaller vessel's reversals in direction didn't slow down the process.

Two long-range expendo-fighters were launched at 23:04 hours, just 20 minutes after the enemy craft jumped into her escape procedure. The two fighters followed separate trajectories chosen by the Battle Cruiser's guidance systems. Each ship's course altered regularly, with statistical precision, narrowing the gap between them and their prey. It would only be a matter of hours and contact would be made. Then the tractor devices would lock hunter and prey together on the same side of the sub-spec planes and the victim would have no possibility of escaping.

The pursuit plan was simple. One of the fighters would jam the scout ship's electronics while the second hunter would launch a net-array of homing mines. Once the mines were in the vicinity of the prey, all jamming would be stopped and the homing mines drawn into the victim's electronically controlled shields. Then it would be over.

Captain Jergen studied the incoming tracking signals from the two black fighters and concluded he'd be caught in their web within an hour, and that the interference occurring in his primary coils was a part of the their battle technique.

"Engineering," Jergen addressed his comm-link, "have Commander Roscoe report to the bridge immediately."

Then, turning to his navigation officer, he began to plot another set of evasive moves which would be dangerous at best, and if things went wrong, would cost him his ship and crew. There really wasn't much choice though. They were in a tight squeeze that only bold and immediate action could extract them from. At least they still had a fighting chance of outwitting the enemy commander and alerting Admiral Coytel of the enemy's presence.

Commander Bale Roscoe, the Ranger's chief engineer, stepped onto the broad command bridge and made for the captain's chair.

"We've got problems, Captain," he stated immediately, "the shields are becoming ineffective and I don't think our cloaking generators will last much longer."

"Don't worry about that, Bale. We have a lot of work to do in the next 20 minutes. Now transmit this to your section crews and initiate this program immediately. First, launch both of our lifeboats with volunteer officers to man them, following this procedure." The captain went on to quickly outline his battle plan as his chief engineer nodded in appreciation. "Have you got it now?"

"Yes sir." Commander Roscoe turned, picked up the nearest comm-link and began giving instructions to all of his section chiefs. Then, after a few minutes, he turned back to the Captain. "We'll have the lifeboats out of their bays in 10 minutes and fully operational on impulse power in 15 minutes. Both the shields and cloaking systems will be activated by a mechanical sequencer in the binary drive's command center and our people will be away from the ships by the time their thrusters come into effect. It will be close, but I think we can pull it off. Lieutenants Cutris, Moroue,

Koulmae, and Fritsche are taking them out with their regular emergency crews of 30 technicians each. They're all volunteers and know what the odds are and will stay with the vessels if things get out of hand."

"Good. Now let's get the rest of our plan into effect."

Alnar brought his fighter's bow around and in line with his target guidance beam. The enemy's primary shields were totally inactive and his cloaking system had holes in it, although they weren't large enough to get a good visual on his vessel. Promaine, commanding the other expendo-fighter, was closing in on the prey from a position some 50,000 kilometers distant and was jamming the scout ship's electronic defensive and tracking systems. He would be close enough in the next few minutes to effectively disrupt all of the enemy's countermeasure systems and then the trap would be complete. Alnar depressed the death-net mine ejector's sequencer bar and counted the 60 gleaming machines as they appeared on his targeting screen. The deadly devices spread out automatically into a preplanned array, held in place by the same electro-magnetic lines that would draw them into the fleeing enemy's electromagnetically charged shields. Alnar dropped his own protective shroud immediately before ejecting the lethal array. He noted that Promaine had done likewise just as he released the tractor field engulfing the doomed scoutship. The shining array of mines shot forward towards the suddenly accelerated electromagnetic activity from the G.C.C. vessel when it happened.

The enemy scoutship seemed to split in half and was heading straight for the two onrushing expendo-fighters, each firing lightning-like charges from their laser generators. The two black fighters could only attempt to evade the attacking vessels, since to raise their defensive shields would attract their own deadly death-net mines. Alnar's targeting screen also detected a mass of small objects heading straight toward his ship from all sides, and then it occurred to him that he was also under attack from thermal-mines and torpedoes fired from the enemy warship. His gun crews were now fully engaged in firing at the elusive little specks as they showered in on the large black fighter.

Commander Roscoe leaned forward, intently studying the bridge's circular gridscreen as Captain Jergen issued a series of orders into his comm-link. The Ranger was proceeding with all

electronic systems shut down, except for the main gridscreen, and was propelled by a single emergency chemical thruster. The two lifeboats were now moving away toward the advancing enemy fighters and their deadly array of electromagnetically attracted mines. The Ranger's torpedo and mine sections had launched a screen of 200 unactivated Magna-T-mines and 130 magna-therm torpedoes in the ten minutes before the enemy tractor field was released. All of the units mechanically self-armed in the last 30 seconds. Now the enemy fighters were in for a real surprise. The two armed lifeboats, their electromagnetic defense shields fully extended, were directing volleys of high-gain laser fire into the black fighters, now within 1,000 kilometers, when they were hit. Both were destroyed almost simultaneously by the array of mines launched by Alnar's ship.

Now it was the black expendo-fighter's turn to become the target of Magna-T-mines and torpedoes that tore into their hulls unchallenged by anything other than defensive laser fire, since their battle shields were still down. Within seconds, both expendo-fighters were engulfed in rocking explosions and then self-detonated, their sub-binary drives first imploding, then exploding out into the second level of the sub-binary plate. The ionic flux emitted from their detonations was strangely amplified and served to aid the Ranger in her escape.

Captain Jergen ordered full binary acceleration the moment the first lifeboat exploded and was now moving far beyond the effects of the ionic flux pulses and charged particles emitted by both the lifeboat's and enemy's sub-binary drives. The multiple charged ionic disturbance in the sub-spec convinced Lord Felhoe Brenn, High Commander of the Sargon's Love, that all three ships had been destroyed in the fracas; therefore he turned his attention back to the G.C.C.'s battle squadron and waited for them to move into fighting range. Unknown to the inferior enemy, five other black battle cruisers were lying in wait and hidden by newly advanced cloaking systems, remaining dormant until the G.C.C. engaged what they thought was a single cruiser. It was logical that the enemy captains would consider their chances of besting the Sargon's Love to be in their favor, so Lord Felhoe Brenn decided to wait patiently for them to make their move.

Jenn stood behind Admiral Feany's high-backed command chair, near the middle of the four square kilometer room with its

700 meter-high curved, star-studded ceiling, and watched his situation board as it changed patterns. This was the headquarters and nerve center for the G.C.C. navy's IXth Battle Group's Extended Reconnaissance Arm, of which the XXIVth Battle Squadron was a part, where the entire quadrant was visible on the darkened domed ceiling over their heads. A bright yellow rectangle outlined a group of stars where the present action was taking place. Miriam had once called this star group the 'Moth', since the constellation looked like one of the winged creatures from a planet on the other side of it. Miriam had noted that the constellation and cloud were now called 'Orion' by many of the inhabitants of that far-off world. One other factor brought these memories to her mind. Mesziah, her home world, was somewhat in a straight line on this side of the constellation from that primitive seventh arm rimworld. That could mean the enemy raider was somewhere in the vicinity of her home, and this very idea distressed her.

Jenn just couldn't forget the innocent little people like Chauncie and Nettie, who didn't have the slightest idea of what the black ones were like. Mesziah, and her teeming population of elves and faeries, wouldn't ever be the same if Samael's hoards discovered its location and began spreading their evil ways there. The very idea of this ever happening repulsed Jenn and strengthened her resolve to do everything possible to support her sisterhood in this endless fight.

"We have a communication from Admiral Coytel on the 'Odulum', Admiral Feany," a tall liaison officer announced. "The scoutship, Ranger, just joined the Battle Squadron after escaping an enemy trap. Her Captain, Filom Jergen, reported that his two sister scoutships, Anwal and Triscut, were destroyed in the action and that he lost two lifeboats with 64 officers and crew aboard during his escape. Here is a list of the volunteers who perished to save the Ranger, sir. Admiral Coytel suspects there are more than one raider waiting out there and he suggests that no immediate engagement be pursued."

"Hmm, Georgen Coytel isn't one to run away from a fight," the Admiral nodded to himself, "I think he might have something there."

Jenn agreed. She knew of this Georgen Coytel through discussions with Miriam about her early life, long before the Great

Conflagration. He, like most Odomaks, was a staunch bigot as well as a damned tough commander. He did know his business.

A courier approached and offered the liaison officer a note which he read for a moment before continuing.

"We have a further signal from Admiral Roydel, sir. He suspects the enemy is able to track his movements even with all cloaking gear at full extension. The intelligence people are breaking down his communication, but the initial gist is that the Ranger was being accurately tracked while in the sub-binary, and it appeared as if she had some sort of beacon aboard to draw the enemy's attention. That would explain why we've been losing so many scoutships in that sector, sir."

"What do you think of this bit of information?" the admiral spoke softly, turning to Jenn. "Your sisterhood people seem to have some insights into such matters."

Jenn bowed slightly and nodded. "Yes. It's very possible the ships may have been infiltrated. But how, we don't know. We have two theories on the matter. One is that something in the ship's electronic controls or electro-magnetic shielding systems has been altered to make the vessels show up on the enemy's tracking screens, or possibly Jerden infiltrators have penetrated G.C.C. security and are operating in the battle groups."

Admiral Feany studied the little elf for a moment before speaking. She looked like a ten-year-old child with sad eyes, not a Nashramh security agent. No one ever doubted the honesty or integrity of these grey-uniformed sisters who were known to be extremely tough as well as fair. But this little creature was hard to take seriously, even though she was reputed to be a genius with cyphers and able to speak the enemy's three major tongues flawlessly.

"So you suspect infiltrators out in our Battle Squadrons, do you?"

"Yes. I also suspect there is at least one in our midst here."

"Oh? What leads you to this suspicion?"

"I've noticed some minor anomalies in your transmissions both to and from your Battle Squadrons during the last six months. I don't know if they're just anomalies, or insertions of a separate code. I've been working on it though, and will report anything I find as soon as I can."

"With the state of our security, I can't believe we've been infiltrated. But then, the enemy is practiced at such maneuvers. Have you notified our central security office of your suspicions?"

"Yes I have. They don't agree with my analysis, but have been keeping track of the items I pointed out to them. They've supplied me with all of their findings for analysis. I suspect they don't want to admit they have an in-house problem, because if they do, then someone will lose face."

Admiral Feany studied the little elf and noted there was definitely more to her than met the eye. A mind like a steel trap encased in an innocent and child-like woman was typical of the Nashramh's devious ways. He certainly liked their style and choice of intelligence personnel. This little one was well worth watching.

"Good. Keep me personally apprised of anything you discover, no matter how flimsy it may appear. If we have a problem, then we're really in trouble."

The admiral turned to the tall liaison officer and continued. "Lieutenant Nellus, have communications notify Admiral Roydel he is to keep track of the enemy raider, but to avoid any contact with him until further notice."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant replied, saluted and left immediately for the communications section.

"Thank you for your observations, Lieutenant, ah . . . B'Mesziah isn't it?"

"Yes, Admiral Feany, it is Sister-Lieutenant Jennanine B'Mesziah."

Jenn noticed someone following her as she walked along the empty corridor toward her apartment complex two kilometers away. She decided to walk home, rather than ride the tram, since she wanted to think about those anomalies in the G.C.C.'s code sequences. There just had to be some hidden key to suggest a cogent pattern to the odd blips that seemed to be only random static discharges in the sophisticated circuitry. Now the sense of being followed made her nervous, so she decided to turn the tables and follow her erstwhile shadow.

While in the Sisterhood's 'Academy of the Ginger and the Rose', Jenn learned all sorts of tricks with respect to surveillance, along with a myriad of combat techniques. She couldn't really imagine herself fighting anyone, not like the tough 'Delta' type sisters, though she knew that sometimes it was necessary when making

an arrest or defending herself against an assault. The best way to do things was to call for help and to remain at a distance when trouble did occur. She was, after all, a translator and cryptanalyst, not a tough combat specialist.

She slipped into a narrow wall opening, which housed a leafy green plant, and pressed against the side so she was nearly invisible unless looked at directly. Within moments, a tall man, with captain's placards on his shoulders, walked briskly and quietly by. Jenn waited for a few moments before sticking her head out and looking both ways. Only the man's tall white-uniformed back could be seen in the distance. She quickly emerged from her hiding place and began trailing the fellow who seemed familiar. He continued on, rounding a corner without looking back, and Jenn pursued him cautiously.

Turning the corner, she came face-to-face with the tall Odomak-looking man who held a laser pistol leveled at her chest. Without thinking, she ducked and spun, drew her fiber-laser and fired. The Odomak's shot missed her by a fraction of a millimeter, but her shot killed him instantly.

Jenn was just picking herself up off the hard deck, and beginning to shake as a reaction to her adrenalin buildup, when a sizzling hiss shot past her and burned a track in the opposite wall. Then she heard two short screams as she turned to return the fire, only seeing two smoldering corpses lying on the stone floor. There were other men bent on killing her, and someone else saved her life, but there wasn't anyone in sight! Off to her left, a quick flutter caught the side of her eye, and then there was nothing.

Then, like a laser stroke, she realized it. It was a winged faery. One of those little empty heads that everyone knew were totally harmless. The faeries, were they really secret operatives of her sisterhood? Who would ever believe they could be killers? For the first time, Jenn realized that Neff was gone . . . in fact, she hadn't noticed her little friend's absence because she'd been concentrating on following the enemy agent. Could Neff have gone back and summoned help? That had to be it.

"My God!" she thought, "even the enemy with all their logic and calculations, have missed this."

Neff flew zig-zagging along the deserted corridor, tears streaming down her cheeks and sobbing. She just had to protect her friend, Jenn, from those black beasts who were going to kill

her . . . she just had to. Now, she too would die . . . it just had to be.

Jenn got her bearings and called for help on a special Nashramh security channel, giving a brief account of what had just transpired. She knew the Necro-Classic unit was aware of everything, but a formal report also had to be made. She was shaking violently, but contained her reaction to the killing and omitted the fact that a faery was involved, just in case their wavelength had been penetrated by the enemy. The dispatcher told her to wait where she was and to let no one near the site, even if she had to shoot it out with any insistent onlookers.

While she waited, passages of the G.C.C.'s Naval Security Handbook ran through her mind.

FAERIES:

This instruction deals with personnel allowed aboard G.C.C. naval vessels, R.A.D. Stations, and other facilities. This section is taken from the G.C.C. Handbook for Dealing with Class III, Sub-Group Humanoid Species, prepared by G.C.C. Naval Personnel Services Group of R.A.D. Station CX2955A of the Seventh Arm Rim Proctorate.

MESZIAN WINGED FAERIES:

The winged faery, 'Shadi-Yalneza', is a non-human biped humanoid originating on the moon, 'Nesziah', orbiting the Class IV planet, 'Mesziah' which is one of the seven worlds of the Odomak Confederation. These small winged creatures are normally brought aboard our vessels and operational stations in the company of Meszian elves who are in the service of the Nashramh Sisterhood. The faeries do not have any capacity other than to be companions to the Nashramh's child-like elfin sisters, and probably serve a symbiotic role with the individual elf. We can determine no functional value for these small creatures, as far as the Nashramh is concerned, since they are totally unreliable and lack a human level of intelligence.

After extensive study of these creatures, most of whom appear to be female, our intelligence and security departments have determined that they are not security risks, but should be considered unreliable because of their immaturity and lack of common sense.

When dealing with Neszian faeries, the following rules should be adhered to:

1. Never discuss anything of importance in the presence of a faery. They repeat everything they see or hear to everyone they encounter.
2. Do not trust a faery with anything of value since they will either lose it or give it away as a present.
3. Faeries always want to please, even when they play tricks on you. They are really trying to entertain you.
4. Do not be rude to faeries. When their feelings are hurt, they try harder to please you and become absolute pests.
5. Faeries are intensely loyal and do not act out of anger or malicious intent; their problem is that they aren't very bright and cause problems out of innocence.
6. If you don't want faeries around when you need privacy, display a weapon for inspection or cleaning. They will disappear since they are terrified of weapons.

NOTE: Asking a faery a question will not produce a rational answer. Our experience with them indicates that their thought process is inadequate for clear thinking, thus they will answer your question with every kind of information except what you asked for in the first place. Their intentions are always good, but their scatterbrained approach to thinking nullifies any possible use as covert agents or messengers.

"Boy," Jenn thought to herself, "they really missed the boat on that one. Wow!"

Five Nashramh security vehicles converged on the spot where Jenn and the three people were located. While she was waiting, Jenn checked each corpse's identity, and was surprised to find Liaison-Lieutenant Caul Nellus from Admiral Feany's staff and Captain Duan Haelet of central communications. She didn't recognize Railene Someor of the facilities group, but her identification disc noted she had a 'Secret' clearance and could travel in closed areas on specific business. Jenn had the feeling this was only the tip of the iceberg, and even Admiral Feany might have something to do with this. Anything was possible.

"You did quite a job, Jenn," Sister Rienee Oches nodded as she inspected the three corpses. "How did you get behind these two birds?"

"I didn't, Rienee," Jenn answered, "but I don't think we should discuss it here. I'll brief you on the details in a secure location."

"Get them out of here, pronto," Rienee motioned to her assistant, then addressed Jenn. "From the track of that little laser I already know who helped you . . . not the name, but who. We'll discuss it with the boss when we get home. Okay?"

"Okay." Jenn replied.

The two climbed into the lead vehicle and waited silently for the cleanup crew to finish with their business, then, the five vehicles made directly for Nashramh Security. Sister Joanah Coruss leaned over and notified Rienee that the three Gamma-B's had been captured and were in a locked crystal.

"They're not Jerdens, but damned dedicated Colmers, I'll bet. Damned good operatives, but they made the mistake of trying to kill one of us. You were probably getting too close to discovering them and forced their hand, Jenn. Once you were out of the way, they still had a lease on life, or so they thought."

"I agree," Rienee nodded. "We've just scratched the surface, and are probably near to their leader. It has to be something like that to force their hand on such short notice."

"I think it's Admiral Feany," Jenn spoke out. "They wouldn't kill me without his knowing about it, or he would begin to wonder. I think he's their primary agent and I disagree with you; he has to be a Jerden."

"It looks something like that, Jenn."

When Jenn arrived at her apartment in the Nashramh's private complex, she was exhausted. The debriefing was surprisingly short, and her commander was relieved that nothing happened to Jenn during the fracas. Other than that, the debriefing dealt only with the details of her discussion with Admiral Feany about the anomalies in the G.C.C.'s code sequences. It appeared her superiors were of the same opinion about the Admiral's connection with the infiltrators. A trap was being set for him, wherein others in his cell could be identified and captured. Jenn was to be kept out of sight for the time being, leading to the fiction that she'd been killed by her antagonists.

Opening her apartment door, Jenn suddenly realized she wasn't alone. Turning and reaching for her fiber laser, she stopped in mid motion.

"Oh no," she thought to herself, "They know I'm still alive!"

Just then, she heard a soft flutter as something darted out of her bedroom.

"Oh my, oh my, we're so glad you returned, Jenn. We were afraid you wouldn't make it in time. You must come into your bedroom right away. Oh yes, indeed. You must hurry and come in right away!" the little winged faery chirped. "We've been waiting for you. You must hurry, Jenn!"

Jenn followed the little glowing creature into her bedroom and found at least a hundred faeries hovering over and around her bed. She hadn't seen so many faeries in a group since before she left Mesziah. They were all distraught until they saw her enter the room.

"Put your hands out here, Jenn," another faerie chirped excitedly. "There isn't much time left."

She didn't understand what was happening, but the faeries were clearly upset and wanted her cooperation immediately. Jenn did exactly as they directed her to without hesitation. After all, they were her closest friends in all the galaxy, except for Miriam.

"Put your hands down like this, Jenn. Now close your eyes."

Placing her hands together on the bedspread, with her palms facing up, Jenn closed her eyes. Something soft and wispy settled in her palms and she was instructed to open her eyes. Neff, her little friend, lay across her palms and was beginning to fade from her soft shimmer to a dull, dusty appearance. Suddenly, Jenn saw her features clearly for the first time . . . they were just like the face at Council Central . . . when she became a binary-extended with Raphael and Miriam! Neff appeared to be a carbon copy of Iyam'i who became Miriam'. Iyam'i was a faery too, and that was what unnerved Jenn at the time . . . now she accepted Neff and Iyam'i both as her own.

Neff's old and withered body slowly decomposed into a fine dust that mixed with the perspiration in Jenn's palms. Then, after a short time there was nothing.

Tears ran down Jenn's cheeks as she remembered her wonderful years with Neff. She took it for granted that they'd always remain together throughout her life. Neff was the first person she met when she had returned to Mesziah in exile so long, long ago. Neff was at her bedside when she died, and waiting for her when she was reborn into this new body. Now she'd just saved her life by killing those two Colmers. Somehow, Jenn knew that

none of this had ever been an accident, and that their lives were joined together for a reason. Now Neff was gone and she'd never see her again. She would miss her little friend with all her heart and soul.

As if understanding what Jenn was thinking, and feeling, a chirping little voice spoke out behind her, "Neff has become one with you, Jenn. Please say you accept her."

"Oh, I truly accept you, Neff!" Jenn began to cry, "Oh, God! I love you! I want you to be with me always. I can't bear the thought of your not being a part of my life."

She couldn't believe that she still had Neff with her. Yes, Miriam had her faery, Iyam'i, and now she would have Neff. Now it all made sense.

Within the fabric of her very being, Jenn felt the substance of something vital and new blending with her. Neff would be with her for all of eternity, and now she could see the little faery in her mind's eye.

"We're together as friends forever," her chirpy little voice sang out, "and we can talk together anytime we want to, and nobody else will ever know. Isn't this wonderful?"

Iyam'i's child-like voice spoke within her inner mind, saying, "I too accept you Jennanine B'Mesziah as one with me." Yes. Now Jenn knew that she was complete and would never be alone again.

Chapter 7

Trench

Recent Jerden inspired wars are the same everywhere, whether on Chuar-no-lot V, on the sixth arm rim, or Odomah-Tek near the seventh arm rim. Armed conscripts fight one another for reasons unknown to them, and for forces they can't comprehend. Primitive societies are being brought into technological revolutions through contrived planet-wide wars designed to bring them to an even bigger conflict.

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The war had been raging for more than a year and a half and the front hadn't moved much since the Boche were pushed back from the Marne in 1914. Telly felt fortunate that he and his comrades were posted on rugged terrain west of the Meuse River where there wasn't much action. Other divisions to the north, along with their British allies, were having a hell of a time and sustaining terrible losses for no real gain. Old Poppa Joffre and his staff were still thinking in terms of cavalry charges and poilus marching in orderly lines into the face of the enemy, red trousers and all. The machine gun and heavy artillery changed all that, but still the officer corps insisted on mass attacks with men and horses in the face of withering fire-power from the enemy's terrible machine guns. Men were mowed down in rows, one after the other, until the battlefield was littered with thousands of corpses. Still it went on, month after month. The Boche, according to Sergeant Dumier, hadn't changed much either, although they appeared to be taking fewer losses. How he knew this, Telly didn't know.

Telly sat across from the sergeant, watching him wind his ankle wrappings above his high-topped shoes and over the cuffs of his blue trousers while making sure each turn was of uniform length.

Sergeant Jean Dumier was a short, stocky man with wide shoulders and a powerful frame. His dark brown eyes were heavily-lidded and calm, causing him to appear less intelligent than he really was.

Although he had a limited formal education, Jean was a skilled cabinetmaker, having done business in Troyes until he was called up with the reserves to defend the Republic. He was married and had two young sons, one 12 and the other nine, whom he often spoke of with tears in his eyes. He had no hesitation to fight the Boche, since the price of a German victory over the Republic was too high to pay. His family and the millions of innocent people of France had to be protected from the rapacious enemy, and he would fight to the bitter end to prevent their victory.

Telly was slightly taller than the sergeant and not quite as sturdily built, although he was far from thin. Both men sported bushy moustaches and well-trimmed beards, as did the few veteran poilus in their battalion. The majority of their young comrades were mere boys of 17 or 18 years, and few had enough hair on their faces to be called a real beard. Otherwise, they were brave young men who were dedicated to the defense of their country.

Sergeant Dumier, like most of the other poilus, didn't really know what was happening in this war, which would soon develop into one of attrition, since he didn't understand the new dimensions of modern warfare. But then, no one on this world had as yet experienced this kind of warfare where machine guns became the most deadly killers, while mortars, artillery, flame throwers, and poison gas were used to maim and kill countless numbers without differentiation. As the distance between combatants grew, the deadly effectiveness of their weapons increased geometrically. Although Jean Dumier talked about attrition as being a military advantage, he really didn't know what it meant.

"No matter how you look at it, attrition is on our side," Dumier was saying. "There are more of us than them."

Telly shrugged his shoulders and turned to face the heavyset man. "So, what difference does it make if there isn't anyone left to

enjoy the victory? All of our young men will have been killed, and for what?"

This shortsighted attitude made Telly feel both ill and angry at the same time. Here was a man who, like all of the other people on this world, loved his wife and children enough to fight and die for them. But now he was arguing for the mass murder of both friend and foe alike, to prove a political point that he didn't even understand. It was infuriating to realize just how gullible and easily misled these people really were.

"Are you suggesting we just surrender to the filthy Boche? Come now, Gerry, you know better than that."

"Don't you think that throwing young men's lives away foolishly isn't a form of surrender? Wouldn't using our heads be better? I think small unit actions with good cover fire might accomplish more, considering our total lack of progress. We could also move to outflank the Boche and strike only where he is weakest, not his strongest concentrations. Attrition doesn't make sense."

"Impossible! If that were possible, then our officers would be using it. How would a simple poilu know about these things?"

"Well, all I can see is young men being maimed and killed on the same spot until somebody decides to end this carnage. From what I hear, we're going to be attacked in force, in the next week or so. I'll bet no one will make any headway and a lot of people will be killed."

"That's the general idea, Gerry. We'll stop them and cost them more than its worth. After awhile we'll bleed them white and then the war will be over."

Telly could easily understand the frozen thinking of the sergeant, who only had a narrow vision of what was going on. But the general officers were a different story. They were proud of their fighting stamina, perseverance, and determination . . . but common sense, no! Throwing away their only real resource on suicidal attacks against machine guns and artillery was hardly common sense, it was stupidity.

The problem was a product of the very nature of their social and political values. Old men, who had no touch with the realities of modern change, were making plans and decisions based on outmoded experience with a total lack of flexibility and realistic imagination. Their wars were fought on maps, with grand formations and troop movements involving millions of men who

were nothing but marks on a piece of paper. The day for hand-to-hand fighting was now being replaced by rapid-firing, long-range weapons that made one man equal to 100 under the correct circumstances. The manipulators of power were bleeding the continent white for reasons never publicly admitted, and the men who died in these grand maneuvers were only worthless pawns in a larger game.

Telly was assigned to this brutal world back in 1049-8N5, posing as a young minstrel, and had spent the last 710 local years moving from one rotten situation to another. The humans here were decent enough personally, but as a society they had so many cruel drawbacks as to make them more monstrous than civilized. He'd taken part in many wars, all of which were savage. This war was by far the worst, since it didn't have anything to do with mere conquest. It was a new process for perfecting the means to slaughter entire populations. It was just a beginning of a giant leap into technological advancement coupled with dehumanizing brutality that would bring about total disaster within another century. The black ones were definitely in control now, or if not at the moment, they soon would be. This war clearly had their signatures on it.

This whole damned thing was a real dilemma. Yes, he knew exactly what was going on, and could see the whole picture. God! How many times had he been a part of this same act, the Grand Marshals used patriotism to move east into the Russias, and the Prussians used the same nationalistic rationale to advance their selfish aims. The poor souls who became caught up in this carnage had no way of knowing how their patriotism was being used to restructure the world's socio-political order to suit Sargon's long-range plans of total conquest.

Of all the cultures he'd encountered on this world, none showed much promise. The new experiment in North America, the United States, was a sham for advancing a sense of freedom, while human beings were exploited in a rapid attempt to increase technological growth. When the goal was met, the so-called freedoms would be withdrawn and totalitarian control exerted on everyone. The seeds of this system were planted long before the new countries on the Western Hemisphere had begun to flourish. Everything was planned with infinite care and detail, and now the countdown was beginning.

The war started while Telly was living in Chaumont, under the name of Gerald Reneau, and within a week he and the other reservists were conscripted into their regular infantry battalion. He'd fought at the Marne, been wounded twice, and assigned to what appeared a quiet front. If it was true about the German buildup across the Meuse, then his days of quiet would be short-lived.

Later in the afternoon, Telly's infantry company, which had only 219 men at the time, was ordered to cross the Meuse and take up positions south of Verdun, where the Boche were sure to make their strongest efforts. This was going to be a tough assignment, and Telly wondered if he would survive it.

Telly didn't have the endurance he once had, and was clearly getting tired; both mentally and physically. He looked forward to the time when he'd be recalled and could return home to his own kind. God, he was tired.

The weather was deathly cold and rainy, with visibility restricted to less than two kilometers. The entire atmosphere was drab as the six blue-uniformed poilus moved slowly along seemingly endless barbed wire entanglements, checking their condition. Back at the bunker, men were digging deeper trenches in preparation for an expected bombardment that would precede the enemy's attack. At this point, the barbed wire entanglements were about 14 meters across and paralleled by a two meter-high abatis about six meters wide. The Germans' bombardment would certainly tear up this well-designed obstruction, but there would be enough of the coiled wire scattered around to cause his infantry a lot of trouble. Somewhere in the back of Telly's mind, he remembered crawling through the mud in a drizzling rain during an attack on an enemy communications station . . . but, that was a long time ago.

A machine gun sounded somewhere to the east of them and all six hugged the muddy ground, keeping their heads down. The mud soaked into their blue greatcoats, making them blend in with the terrain, and there was enough low foliage around to obstruct the German gunner's attention. Telly positioned himself so he could sight his Lebel along the line of fire, just in case the Boche were sending anyone his way. After firing a few short bursts, the machine gun was silent. No one could be sure if they'd been seen, or if the enemy was just dusting off the field, but they still had to

check the entanglements thoroughly before returning to their bunker.

The next nine days were filled with activity as the poilus dug their trenches deeper and repositioned their machine guns and observation ports. At first, many of the men thought the Germans would attack to the north, but growing numbers of probes indicated they were in the direct line of attack. The question now, was when the Boche would mount their offensive. The weather had cleared up enough for decent visibility and the ground was firm enough for massed infantry movements.

The first detonations shook the earth as huge artillery shells struck the ground and exploded with tremendous force 100 meters away. Telly had just relieved Hammon at the observation port and Lieutenant Moet was checking his pocket chronometer when the first shell hit. Within seconds, the air was filled with explosions, flying shards of shrapnel, and dense black smoke. It was February 21, 1916 and the battle for Verdun had just begun.

Telly dropped to the bottom of the trench and crawled behind Lieutenant Moet toward their command bunker. Huge chunks of mud and earth showered down on them as the rolling barrage engulfed the entire area. For a short time Telly lost track of what was happening, only coming to his senses after he rolled down the entrance of their bunker on Lieutenant Moet's heels. The young lieutenant tried to speak but was drowned out by the pounding explosions, so pointing, he gestured for Telly to follow him into the back of the structure. Once there, they sat in the light of an oil lantern and opened a half empty bottle of brandy and each took a drink.

How long the barrage lasted, Telly didn't know, but when it stopped, everything was somehow unreal. There were at least 20 men huddled in the cramped room, with only a single lantern still burning. The air was filled with dust and the acrid smell of burning powder.

"To your posts," Moet called out, "Sergeant, get your men to their posts!"

"All right, to your posts," Sergeant Dumier bellowed as the nearly shell-shocked young men struggled to their feet and made for the narrow exit.

Telly pulled a bundle of racket grenades out of a large cubbyhole and thrust it in the sergeant's hands. "I'll get more and distribute them outside."

Dumier turned and pushed the last man out, not answering. He knew the old veteran would do the right thing and a lot of grenades were going to be necessary.

There were four burlap sacks of racket grenades and one of nail bombs, which were sticks of dynamite with nails tied around it, a damned good defensive device in a pinch. Hauling the sacks behind him, Telly emerged out into the nearly destroyed trench where his comrades were positioning themselves for a fight. Keeping his head down, he moved along it, distributing the grenades to each man, and gave each a few words of encouragement.

"Wait till they're in the wire before throwing these, and don't make yourself a target. Don't fire until you have a clear target, and keep down, don't stand up."

None of these young men had ever been on the line before as most of them were new conscripts facing their first fight. God, he felt sorry for these mere children of 17 and 18 years. Most of them would never see the morning sun, and even now it distressed him to see their drawn and frightened faces. What a filthy mess.

Suddenly everything happened at once. Explosions from enemy mortars overhead sprayed burning steel shards down over their heads. Men screamed out as the hot fragments ripped through their flesh, many dying instantly. A ragged staccato of rifle and machine gunfire began along the enemy's front as grey-uniformed troops came over the top and rushed headlong toward the French positions. Then the sound of the Mitrailleuses came from behind them as their Browning machine guns rattled along the gutted trench and thousands of Lebels, joined in the firing. The young poilus worked their bolts: firing, ejecting, reloading, and firing round after round of deadly ammunition.

The Boche didn't make it past the barbed wire entanglements, most of which were chopped to pieces by the artillery barrage, but bundles of the black steel caught hundreds of men and held them fast until they were shot down by the desperate defenders. The terrain all around was pockmarked with deep shell holes, many intersecting with others making the ground almost impossible to move over in any kind of order. Enemy soldiers used the deep

hollows for cover, but couldn't mount a unified attack over the torn earth. During brief lulls in the firing, Telly and Sergeant Dumier moved back and forth along the line of men, propping up the young poilus and giving them encouragement. Surprisingly few of them had as yet been killed or wounded, and they fought on with a determination that stopped the enemy in their tracks.

"Keep it up, son," Telly spoke into a young man's ear, "keep down and slow your fire. Take aim and let him come to you."

Moving along the line of soldiers, Telly noticed Lieutenant Moet gesturing to him. He turned to move toward Moet, then everything went black. . . .

"Good afternoon Private Reneau. How do you feel today?" the thin-faced old woman spoke warmly. "You've been sleeping for quite awhile."

"Where am I?" he struggled to speak.

"You're at Chalons, in our hospital. Do you remember being wounded?"

"No. I don't remember anything except. . . ."

"You'll be all right now, Private Reneau, your back and hip will mend in time. You've been asleep for several days, and everything is fine now."

"Do you know when I'll be able to return to the front? I have to. get. . . ."

"Oh, no. You won't be going back to the front, Private. Your back has been fractured and your hip shattered by a shell. You have also had a bad concussion. The doctor said the war is over for you. Just rest and we will help your body mend."

Telly lay back and tried to organize his thoughts. The lovely old woman washed his brow with a cool, damp cloth and spoke reassuringly to him about getting better and returning to his family. "God," he thought, "why can't there be more like her on this damned world?"

During the following days, bits and pieces of memory came back to him. Sounds and sensations seeping through the opiates used to sedate him after he'd been operated on in one of those torture chambers they called an operating theater. The surgeons were quick and efficient, despite their limited knowledge and technical equipment. His having two hearts escaped them as it had previous doctors. It was probably the overwhelming numbers of wounded men passing under their knives that accounted for this

oversight. The fact that he healed twice as fast as other wounded men didn't get past them, but the sheer number of casualties pouring in from the front deflected their attention. If it hadn't been for Dove reinforcing his determination and self-control, there were many times he could well have given himself away by allowing his real emotions to take control. She was his real strength, especially when he was hurt and disoriented.

From the casualties flooding into the hospital, overwhelming the surgical staff and the all too few nurses and orderlies, it was clear to Telly that this battle exceeded anything else that had happened before. He learned his entire battalion was wiped out and his friend, Jean Dumier, was killed the same day he'd been wounded. Lieutenant Moet was wounded by fragments from the same shell that struck Telly, and lost his left leg as a result. The wounded were removed from the Verdun Salient by the LaVoie Sacree as thousands of reserve troops were rushed the other direction to fill their places.

Years later, Telly was to learn that the Germans fired more than 2,000,000 shells into the Noyen Bulge where the Verdun Fortress was their key objective. This was the greatest bombardment in history, and only a foretaste of things to come. They made some headway into the salient, but hadn't been able to cross the Meuse River, and lost far more men and material than they'd anticipated. The Boche introduced flame-throwers into the battle, and Diphosgene gas four months later, thus changing the entire character of the war to a total nightmare.

After a week, he moved to a convalescent home near Dijon. From there, he was issued a medical discharge from the army before he actually healed, but again, the overwhelming number of wounded men pouring into the overtaxed facilities made this necessary. In the long run, it served his best interests, since the more he was around these doctors and medical specialists, the more likely they would discover his real physical differences.

The weather was cold and damp as Telly left the convalescent home, walking unsteadily on crutches. His hip still ached, although it had mended quite well, and his back was held firmly by a hardwood and canvas brace that would remain part of his attire for the next 15 years. There were more casualties coming in each day and the wards were now crowded with convalescing young men, many with arms and legs missing, and even more with

terrible lung damage. Poison gas was now being used by the Germans, and would soon be in common use by both sides. The war was degenerating to even greater brutality, if that was possible, and the world's future generations would reflect this negative tide in more than one way.

Telly decided his stay here in France was soon to be over. He made up his mind to return to the United States and take on a new identity before the war got out of hand, and he was called back into the army. When enough young men were killed off, they would be impressing old men, children, and wounded veterans back into service with the reasoning that they were now fit for duty. It would have to come to that, and in the not too distant future.

* * *

There are Necro-Classic powers and agencies present on more than 1,000,000 worlds on which we and the Ansharim have established our presence . . . Sister Martha Weiss was one of our watchers serving on Odomah-Tek.

Frau Martha Weiss stood looking down at the late morning traffic, moving slowly below her library window, on the rain swept Rathaus-Strasse. The war was still dragging on and young Austrian boys were conscripted into the battalions of death and misery in ever greater numbers. There wasn't any pretense of glory in the thousands of returning casualties, many of whom suffered from poison gas, along with other debilitating wounds that left them broken and old before their time. This was by far the most awesome and all-encompassing conflict this world had ever experienced, but it wasn't as yet the beginning of the real cataclysm; the second sounding of the Shofar hadn't occurred yet.

"How can these people hate their children so?" she spoke aloud into the empty room. "Little boys who haven't even grown beards are being made into cannon fodder, and for what? To prepare the way for Sargon's Legions of Light? No, not yet."

"That will come soon enough, my dear," the soft voice sounded in the recesses of her inner mind, "they'll use the products of this carnage to forge the blades of their next meat grinder."

"Will there be any young men left for them to build armies with, and who will lead them? The senile old men who're orchestrating

this carnage don't have what it takes to be Sargon's real emissaries," Frau Weiss answered.

"They aren't the ones who will spearhead the next move. There are a number of their recruits, whom we've identified, now being primed for this new wave of sorrow. One, of note, has used special drugs and inadvertently invited the black ones into his body. We will watch him carefully since he has their protective shields around him."

"May I know his name," Martha asked, "possibly we can seek him out and. . . ."

"No. As I said, he has their special protection and there are many others who can also do the job. This creature has been committed to the black one's cause and they will protect him at all costs. We can't afford to show our hand this early in the game, or we'll forfeit all our present advantages. I'm afraid we'll just have to stand by and observe him for the time being; the real focus of enemy power hasn't emerged yet, so we'll have to wait."

"I can see this carnage is definitely the breeding ground for the Legions of Light. Everything points to it, and the technology necessary for their success is coming to the surface."

"No. Only the forerunners of the Legions of Light will emerge from this conflict. The real technology will only begin to arise from it, as will the restructuring of the dominant societies so their plan can actually be implemented. It will take them at least 75 to 80 years to accomplish."

"I have the feeling we won't survive the next wave of sorrow," Martha spoke softly. "We're going to be caught up in it regardless of how careful we are."

"That's true. You'd better make provision for such an eventuality by training auxiliary male personnel to write and teach portions of our discipline to those surviving children who can be brought into our service when the first battles have ended."

"Yes, I'll make plans for just such an eventuality."

Frau Martha Weiss, known to only a few special people as 'Sarah of Vienna', continued her conversation with her unseen mentor long into the afternoon. They spoke together until they had forged a plan for future operations that would counter the deadly effects of the upcoming disaster which would be known as 'The Second World War'.

Chapter 8

Bremerhaven

It is difficult to expect positive results from a program wherein not all the participants know the nature of their specific roles . . . as happened with Solah-nim.

19:16-14 DEMIN 1604-8N5

The Gestapo had rounded up all known Communists in the neighborhood and was shipping many to a place west of Bremerhaven, called Esterwegen. Everyone staying at the hotel agreed that Communists and Jews were behind the defeat of Germany and responsible for the terrible state of the post-war economy. The Communists, according to the Nazis, undermined the war effort to bring about a revolution such as occurred in Russia, and the Jews had done so to promote profit and world Zionism. It was proven that international Jewish bankers were behind the scenes and bent on conquering the world, while Herr Hitler, now proclaimed der 'Fuehrer', was the only means of ridding Germany of their filthy presence. The year before, swarms of Jews left the country and now the others were beginning to get the hint that they weren't wanted. Soon, they'd all be put in their place along with the Communists.

Natina found herself strangely drawn to the fascinating black uniforms of the newly independent SS troops. She'd always been drawn to handsome sailors and the tall soldiers of the army, with their field-grey uniforms and high boots. They were all so proud and brave, marching in parades and driving those powerful new war machines called panzers. During the Great War, the navy

dominated Bremerhaven and their submariners from Kiel were her favorite customers because of their laughter and rousing conversations. Now there were soldiers and SS men parading around, especially since the stupid SA bullies were put in their place in July. Natina disliked the brutish SA men, with their silly-looking hats, but never let the fact slip. To do so would have invited disaster. There were police informers all over the place, along with the SA, who were hell-bent on weeding out dissenters, Communists, and Jews from every business in the country. Even though she kept to the hotel most of the time, she was afraid of being mistaken for a Jewess and beaten by SA bullies. Just why she was drawn to these new SS men, who were actually the same as the SA, she didn't know. Possibly it was their military bearing and sense of total discipline and dedication that fascinated her so much; otherwise she was terrified of them.

As far as the rhetoric about the Communists and Jews was concerned, she didn't believe any of it. The Jewish family who owned the hotel, and others from whom Helen bought supplies, were kind and honest people who never bothered anyone. How they could be considered to be so villainous was beyond Natina's ability to understand. As for the Communists, they didn't seem to be anything more than people who wanted a greater sense of social and economic justice for everybody. But here, she didn't know much more about them than she read in the daily papers. The things that were being done to the Jews, though, made her decide to leave the country rather than be a part of what was sure to happen. Another war and persecutions that made the Russian pogroms seem small by comparison.

Helen died in her sleep during the night and now the police were checking into the matter. Natina was ordered to report to the city's police station at noon to fill out the required paperwork. It was then that she discovered what was going on with the hotel's owners and the pressure placed on them to divest themselves of all their property. Since they were Jews, the government under Herr Hitler's leadership, was systematically stripping them of all their rights of citizenship.

Helen's untimely death determined Natina's fate, regardless of her plans to leave the country, for now the hotel was to be closed down until it was sold and the business taken over by an 'Aryan' firm. She no longer had anyone to protect her and didn't want to

wait for that ominous knock on the door. She decided to leave immediately.

As soon as the police certified the death was natural and released Natina from questioning, she approached Sergeant Hoffman, one of Helen's friends, and asked for a favor. Sergeant Hoffman was on duty at the booking desk and nothing of importance was going on.

"Excuse me, Herr Hoffman," she spoke hesitantly, "do you remember me, Natina Calinis? I worked with Frau Krause at the hotel . . ."

"Yes, I know who you are, Fraulein Calinis. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Herr Hoffman, you know that I'm from Latvia but some people think I look Jewish. Would it be better if I could work on a merchant ship for a while until things get better? You see, I no longer have a job at the hotel."

"Yes, Fraulein Calinis, I know you're from Latvia and have sailed before. Frau Krause told me all about you. Do you have any money?"

"No I don't, Herr Hoffman. I don't know how I can pay you."

"No. You don't have to pay me anything. You will need money for later. I know what you're about." He nodded his head seriously as he said this. "You must sign aboard a ship going to Canada or the United States . . . England is not safe for your needs."

"I don't understand, Herr Hoffman," Natina nearly panicked, looking around to see if anyone was listening, but no one was paying attention.

"Oh, yes you do, Fraulein. Frau Krause told me about you and asked me to help you if anything happened to her. I will see a friend of mine and get you a job on a merchant ship sailing for North America. Stay at the hotel until I call on you. Okay?"

"I will do as you say, Herr Hoffman. Thank you."

Natina left the police station wondering what Helen Krause told the policeman about her. She didn't even know anything about herself that she could relate to the situation. Now Herr Hoffman seemed to know her plans, even though she hadn't breathed a word of it to a living soul.

Once back at the hotel, Natina went to Helen's room and began to organize her things for storage. There was no record of Frau Krause's family, and her property was to be stored until they could

be located. In the process, she came across a leather wallet containing a large amount of foreign money. Looking closely, Natina realized that one packet of paper bills were American dollars in denominations of ones, fives, and tens, amounting to 204 dollars. She removed this packet and left the other currency which was in French, British and Russian notes.

Helen Krause was buried on the morning of January 2nd, and Natina returned immediately to the hotel where she stayed out of sight for the next 17 days. During this period, her employer, Herr Weisman, directed her to close the business and prepare the building for closure. He was being pressured by the authorities to divest himself of properties properly belonging to Aryans, and could no longer keep the hotel open. He sent Natina her last month's wages along with a note instructing her to denounce him to the police and Gestapo if they talked to her. He wished her the best for the future and suggested several other hotels where she might find employment. Natina phoned the different hotels, but found there were no immediate openings. It really didn't matter, though, since she was planning to leave the country anyway.

It was now January 19th and Natina, accompanied by Herr Hoffman, traveled to Bremen by motorcar. If it hadn't been for Sergeant Hoffman acting as her escort, Natina would never have gotten past the port authorities and onto the steamship. He had obtained her work permit and revised seaman's papers, the date of which was altered by 20 years, thus hiding her apparently advanced age, since she looked to only be in her forties. Even Herr Hoffman was struck by her obvious youth, and thought the alteration would prevent any unwanted inquiry as to the document's authenticity. He'd also negotiated a job for her on a German ship, the 'Bremen', which was sailing to Southampton and then to New York, in the United States. From there the Bremen would continue back to Southampton, in Britain, and then to Bremerhaven.

There were Gestapo agents everywhere checking for Jews, and other special people, attempting to leave the country. They weren't concerned about Jews leaving the country; on the contrary, they approved wholeheartedly. The only catch was they wanted the people's money and valuables before they left. It was pure and simple theft. A great number of Jews had already left the previous

year and more were trying to escape the punitive measures being applied to them. Natina didn't know of any other reasons why the Gestapo would want to stop Jews from leaving, except to shake them down for all their money before they could get away.

Sergeant Hoffman walked with his arm around her shoulders as if she were his girlfriend and even kissed her good-bye. When the ship's purser checked her papers, a Gestapo man reached over and took them.

Looking at her carefully, he noted the dates on the documents and appeared suspicious.

"You are from Latvia and have been working in a hotel here in Bremerhaven? Why are you now being employed on a German ship?"

"The proprietress who operated the hotel died three weeks ago and the building has been closed to be sold to another party. I'm working on a ship until I can find another permanent job at a hotel. Unfortunately, there are no positions open now."

"That's about it," Sergeant Hoffman shrugged his shoulders. "The hotel is owned by a Jew who exploited the women by working them for next to nothing in wages. Now she's free of his heavy hand."

"A Jew?"

"Yes. A Jew named Weisman from Hamburg," Herr Hoffman continued. "The same family's owned the building since 1880. Now it's been closed down and will be sold to an Aryan, as it should be."

The Gestapo man checked his papers, noted the hotel's address and verified what Sergeant Hoffman said was correct. Nodding his head, he handed the documents to the purser and turned his attention to other matters.

"Your papers are in order, Fraulein Calinis," the purser agreed, making a notation in the crew register and stamping a certification on the documents. "These papers will be returned to you when you leave the ship. You may go aboard now."

Sergeant Hoffman kissed her and spoke softly, although loud enough for both the purser and Gestapo man to hear.

"When you get back, we'll have a good time. I'll get a leave and we can go to Berlin and see our Fuehrer and all the grand things there."

"I'll let you know as soon as I get back," she spoke breathlessly and then the two parted. She'd never kissed a man before and the

touch of his lips both excited her and gave her a feeling of well-being.

Natina climbed the steep gangplank and boarded the large steel ship. A crewman, at the top of the gangplank, directed her to her quarters, which were below deck and next to the crew's galley. She was to work as both a scullery maid in the galley and a waitress in the officers' mess. The job, she soon learned, was much easier than her work at the hotel and allowed her a great deal more time to read and think. The voyage to New York, although rough most of the way, was generally pleasant and gave her time to plan.

First she would jump ship when they reached New York, in the United States, then travel by train across the country to San Francisco. Once there, she would find work in a hotel, or boarding house, and keep out of sight until she could decide on another course of action. She'd found an old American tourist's booklet in one of the hotel rooms, with essential phrases in English and maps of the country, so she had something to refer to in her planning. Natina remembered some of the English language she'd learned, before arriving on this world, and also from radio programs in the language on BBC from London. She began practicing a number of phrases, in the seemingly backward language, until she could say them easily without thinking. It would be very important to appear to be an American from a location where German immigrants lived in large numbers, and she knew there were large communities of them in North Dakota and other parts of the country's central region. With this in mind, she rehearsed a number of stories about being from a city named Bismark. She would take her first train to this Bismark, then board another from there to San Francisco. That was all there was to it.

The passenger ship sailed with the morning tide and made its way westward across the North Sea toward the Atlantic Ocean. During the Great War, the waters around Bremerhaven were strewn with mines by the British so that sea traffic nearly came to a stop. Now the sea was choppy and a chill wind blew across the ship's deck carrying a fine spray of salt water with it. Nothing changed for 18 days as the steamship sailed steadily across the stormy Atlantic towards the United States.

Her daily routine allowed Natina a great deal of time to lounge on the ship's fantail watching the boiling wake frothing behind it. She daydreamed about this new country she was traveling to, and

wondered how she'd be able to fit in and make a good living. From all the stories she heard from merchant seamen at the hotel, this was a wonderful land where a person could get a fresh start and make a million dollars. Money wasn't really important to her, but moving around and not be hiding all the time was. America was a big country where it was said a person could get lost and never have to worry about the Gestapo or endless wars. This, she knew would be a good place to live, and even to make a lot of friends . . . oh, how she wanted to have friends.

The Bremen was moored at a long, wooden dock reaching out at an angle on the Hudson River for 10 hours, on the morning of February 10th, and some of the sailors had gone ashore to celebrate. The captain didn't allow his foreign crew to leave the ship, keeping their seaman's papers locked up in his safe, probably on orders from the Gestapo or other government agency. Natina wasn't surprised by this rule and hadn't requested shore leave. Instead, she waited until after midnight and then made her planned escape.

She'd gathered together a suit of men's clothing from the hotel, before leaving Germany, and now packed them in a waterproof oilcloth bag with a warm coat, some of her other clothing, several towels, and half a loaf of bread. Her money was sealed in an oilcloth pouch hung around her neck by a stout cord. She took her outer clothing off and donned a blue bathrobe and slippers. Now she was ready.

Slipping out of her cabin, Natina stole through the galley and made for an open hatch on the starboard side of the ship which was used to dump garbage overboard. She had deposited two lifejackets behind a stack of burlap sacks and now removed them. Quickly donning one of the bulky vest-like devices, she then tied her oilskin bag in the other with a stout cord, and then tied it to her own life-jacket.

It was dark on the outward side of the moored ship, with only small sparkling lights on the opposite pier. The swiftly flowing water looked black and ominous as she lowered herself over the edge of the side hatch, pulling the second lifejacket over with her. Hanging there for a long moment, shivering in the cold winter air, Natina let go and dropped four meters down into the icy water. The current immediately pulled her along and around the opposite pier as she struggled to return to the surface. The water was so cold it

took her breath away, and she had difficulty breathing, gasping and coughing as she was swept along in the dark.

After what seemed like a lifetime, she got control of herself, and clung to the second lifejacket. The current pulled her past a number of docks and then in toward shore and she slowly struggled toward the dark riverbank. How far she went before reaching the cold muddy bank, she didn't know, but she finally pulled herself up and out of the water. She was so cold her teeth were chattering uncontrollably, and her limbs were numb. Despite this, she fumbled with her lifejacket and, after removing her bag, threw it into the river, along with the other one. Opening the oilskin bag, she pulled out a large towel placed on top. Every item was packed so she could pull it out and dress in the dark. She pulled off her soaking bathrobe and underwear, discarding them into the river.

Rubbing herself vigorously with the dry towel, Natina got her circulation moving again. Then, fumbling in her bag with shaking hands, she dressed as fast as she could in her underwear, the man's shirt, stockings and trousers, and then the heavy jacket and short-billed cap. Her black boots came last. The jacket was too large for her, but it was thick and warm. Now that she was dressed, she picked up her oilskin bag and climbed the steep riverbank to a vacant lot above.

Looking around in the dim light of nearby buildings, Natina realized she'd come ashore just outside a fenced freight yard on one side and some railroad tracks on the other, and could easily walk to a nearby street. Once on the street, which had a sign identifying it as West 60th Street, she began walking towards the greatest concentration of lights and away from the river. After going two blocks, she turned left on 10th Avenue and continued walking. She was freezing cold and her short hair was still wet under her cap and walking as fast as she could help warm her up and kept her blood circulating. Otherwise, she couldn't have controlled her violent shivering.

She walked along for several hours until the sky began to lighten. Ahead was a high bridge crossing the river, and the cross street she came to was West 175th. Suddenly it occurred to her that she was going the wrong direction. Her destination was a train station located on East 42nd and Park Avenue. Turning around, she backtracked as far as West 85th Street and then followed it to

a large park area, which on her tourist map, was called 'Central Park'. It was now mid-afternoon and she was dog tired. She decided to sit down and eat the rest of her bread which she'd been nibbling for some time. Shortly, she continued eastward through the park until she reached Madison Avenue, where she turned south.

It was late afternoon when Natina arrived at Grand Central Station and figured out where to buy her train tickets. How far she'd walked, she didn't know. It seemed like at least 30 kilometers. The man behind the ticket counter had difficulty understanding her English, but accepted her money and issued her tickets without hesitation.

"Here ya-are, lady, one ticket to Chicago. There ya-change trains for Bismark." Then stamping another ticket, he handed it to her. "This-un's for Bismark. You'll have a two hour layover in Chicago. Yer gate's down that way, and its departure time and track number's listed on the board over there."

"Thank you, good sir," she bowed slightly, wondering how he knew she was a woman. Apparently her man's clothing didn't do the trick. Anyway, the man wasn't interested, and was nothing like the efficient railroad officials in Germany.

Picking up her bag, Natina walked over to the large information display board listing arrivals and departures of a long list of trains. Studying the entries carefully, she found her train scheduled to leave at 6:30, and noted the gate and track number on a wrinkled piece of paper. A loudspeaker blared out arrivals and departures to inform people of the various routes, although she could hardly understand the booming voice. She was hungry, having eaten her half loaf of bread before noon, and now remembered a lunch counter she'd passed when entering the station.

"Wacha going to have?" the heavyset woman behind the counter queried, giving Natina the once-over.

"I would like to order a cup of coffee and a ham sandwich, if you please," she answered, remembering the phrase from the tourist guidebook she'd found years before.

"Okay. Ham-n-rye, Bob," the woman called out while pouring a hot cup of coffee. "There's cream-n-sugar on the counter if you want any."

"Thank you, madam." Natina spoke slowly, trying to smile.

"Ya new to this country?" the woman asked, tilting her head to the side. "Ya sure got a thick accent."

"No. I am from Bismarck, North Dakota. I have been visiting my son here in New York."

"Oh, yeah, I heard there was a lotta Germans over that way. I guess ya don't talk a lotta American over there, huh?"

"We are farmers and speak much German at home," Natina nodded.

"Hope ya liked the city," the woman laughed, handing Natina her ham sandwich on a big plate with potato salad and a thick slice of pickle on it. "Ain't nothing like New York City anywhere. Believe me, this is the middle o' the world."

After eating and resting, Natina had no trouble with the new currency and paid the waitress, adding a ten cent tip. Then she left the lunch counter and made her way to the gate where her train would be leaving in half an hour. The sandwich, salad and three cups of coffee really made a difference and gave her new strength, although her throat was sore and her chest didn't feel right.

The man's booming voice over the loudspeaker called out in its monotonous tones . . . for Buffalo, Cleveland, and Chicago on track . . ." Everything seemed to be so loud and happening so fast that Natina's head began to spin.

People brushed by her as she walked along the platform to get on the train. A tall dark-skinned man, with a white jacket and red cap on his head, noted her obvious confusion and approached her.

"You need help, lady? Let me see your ticket please."

Natina thought the man was an official of some kind and readily handed him her ticket. A chill ran up her spine and her forehead began to perspire as she waited for him to demand her identification papers.

"All right, you get on that car down there. The porter will check your ticket and tell you where to sit. Have a good trip." He smiled warmly and handed her ticket back.

"Thank you, sir," she spoke softly and bowed.

Once on the train, she sat next to a wide window on the left side of the car. The seat was very comfortable and she nearly fell asleep before a sense of caution caught up with her. She remained alert as possible while the train began to move slowly along the track, and then gradually picked up speed.

"Ticket, please?"

Startled, Natina looked up, recognizing the porter who had directed her to her seat. Handing him her ticket, she said, "I am traveling to Chicago, thank you."

The man punched her ticket and returned it to her. "The dining car's open if you're hungry, lady. Have a nice trip."

It was unbelievable how casual and unsuspecting these Americans were. And to think, nobody ever asked her for her identification papers. This was amazing.

The train sped along through the night and Natina slept soundly due to exhaustion, and partly because of the rhythmic motion of the car.

Chicago was cold and windy, and Natina didn't venture outside the station for more than a few minutes. The people here seemed different from those in New York, almost hostile, but not quite so. She could hardly understand their fast talking twang, and had to think carefully before answering the porter when she boarded the train for Bismarck. The man spoke so quickly, she thought at first he was speaking another language, a fact that didn't amuse him.

Once in the car, she settled down for the long trip to Bismark, which would take about 23 hours because of the stops at Oshkosh, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Fargo before reaching her destination. Fortunately, she wouldn't have to leave the car at any of these stops, although some of the train's cars would be switched at Minneapolis. She didn't feel well, but appreciated the warmth and comfort of these American trains, and looked forward to viewing the scenery along the way. The architecture in this country was disappointing compared to the lovely buildings in St. Petersburg and even Bremerhaven. But the landscape was something else, and this new country was abounding with wide open spaces.

The trip seemed to take forever as the train sped along endless tracks across vast spaces of open land. Natina found that she slept most of the time, not because she was bored, but because she was weak and ill. She'd developed a bad cold and found breathing difficult when she walked to the water closet at the end of the car, or the dining car which was located five coaches forward of hers. She realized she'd have to stay at a hotel in Bismark for a few days to clean up and to recoup her strength. Otherwise, she'd certainly fall ill, which she couldn't afford. Thus far, her money was holding out, and the stay at a hotel wouldn't be too costly.

The hotel in Bismark was a medium-sized brick building, of three stories, serving working class patrons. For some reason, Natina couldn't remember its name or much about it except for her room which was on the second floor, overlooking both the railroad tracks and the Missouri River. The loud roaring and chugging of the steam engines could be heard day and night, otherwise the room, which sported a large double bed and inside wash-basin, was warm and comfortable. The bathroom and water closet were at the end of the hall.

Natina took steaming baths in the huge four-legged cast iron bath tub each evening when the other customers had gone to bed. She discarded her man's clothing and dressed in her regular dress and shoes. It was obvious that everyone knew she was a woman anyway. During the remainder of the following days and nights, she kept to her bed and tried to fight off her worsening illness. It took all her effort to go next door to the lunch counter for her meals, which consisted mostly of coffee and hot homemade soups. It was impossible to eat much of anything else.

After more than a week, she'd lost track of time as one day drifted into another. Finally, she knew she had to move on, so she paid her bill and checked out of the hotel. Whatever was wrong with her couldn't be cured here, and she was afraid to go to a hospital for fear of running afoul of the authorities. Her entire stay in Bismark, North Dakota, was a fevered haze of shadows and dreams without any concept of passing time. Natina walked unsteadily to the train station, not noticing the icy cold, and bought tickets for San Francisco, by way of Seattle, Washington. She would have to change trains in Seattle, after a layover of six hours, then continue south to her ultimate destination. After that, she didn't know what to do since thinking was now difficult.

The long trip by train was a monotonous affair. She hardly remembered eating or using the water closet; otherwise she drowsed or slept in her seat. Once she awoke to find a blanket placed over her, and again when the porter brought her a sandwich and a cup of coffee. Both he and the conductor had, for some reason or other, decided to have her meals brought to her, although she didn't remember ever paying for them. She recalled the train stopping at Spokane, where a number of young people

boarded the coach. Their chatter and laughter helped raise her spirits. They got off somewhere in the mountains and everything dissolved into memories and dreams. Somewhere in the distance she thought she heard the word Olonbourg, or something like that.

"Are you still a lesbian?"

"Huh? What's that?"

"Do you still like to have sex with other women?"

"Nuh . . . no! I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? Do you know who I am? Or, who the woman standing behind you is?"

"No."

"Don't you recognize our uniforms?"

"No. I've never seen anything like them before."

"Don't you remember anyone wearing uniforms like this at Borgdragon? Surely you remember your wonderful experiences while you were there?"

The woman sitting back in her chair was so clear that Natina could actually reach out and touch her and she was talking about things Solah-nim . . . no Natina . . . didn't understand.

"Who said you were stupid? You can think about all sorts of interesting things, but you have trouble learning what others are teaching. Isn't that right?"

"Well, yes. . . ."

"It's time we left. Secure the creature."

"Don't move a muscle, young woman. I don't want to hurt you."

"Are you police?"

"Okay, now keep your mouth shut and do what you're told. Now move!"

The train continued rhythmically to the clickety-clak of the steel wheels on the track as Natina dreamt dreams that were something more than just dreams or memories - they had a dimension of reality that frightened her . . . and she drowsed in a trance-like stupor as the wheels went clickety-clak, clickety-clak, clickety. . . .

There were lessons on how to eat, to speak, to read, with long hours of studying, and the exercises . . . over and over until she lost all sense of time and place. Then there was that lovely music before lights out.

"You won't have any trouble adjusting to your new life. We know all about you . . . you're well-practiced at lying, cheating and stealing . . . you'll do all right. Now get out of my sight!"

"I wonder who she is?"

"I don't know. But from all appearances, she's some sort of condemned criminal or they wouldn't have her blindfolded and her wrists strapped together."

"Well, whoever she is, I hope things go well for her. This is certainly no place to be put into exile. It's more like being sentenced to hell."

"Put these clothes on, now! Make it fast!"

"Now get out of here!"

"Ma'am, we're at the end of the line, Ma'am. It's time to get off the train."

"Oh, ja . . . Ich . . . Ich verstehen sie . . . ja . . ." Natina struggled to wake up as the conductor gently shook her.

"We're in Seattle, Ma'am. You'll have to get off."

The tall man helped her with her oilcloth bag and guided her to the end of the coach.

"Here, let me help you down, Ma'am."

Once on the loading platform, the cool air helped wake her to her senses, and she thanked the gentleman for his help. After a few moments, he directed her to the station's main lobby where she could make arrangements to catch her next train.

Natina walked out of the train station and without any plan or idea of where she was going, wandered along the street past numerous people and hazy buildings. She didn't know where she was, and stopped to try and get her bearings when suddenly her head hit the sidewalk.

"Hey! What's the matter, lady? Hey, somebody call a copper!"

A blue-coated policeman knelt over her and checked her carefully. Then motioning for everyone to stay away, he walked over to a metal phone box mounted on a utility pole and called for help.

"This is Warford, on Second and King, send an ambulance for a sick woman . . . yeah, a sick woman . . . no, not a transient, she's got money and a train ticket."

"Put her here, we'll have a doctor look at her in a few minutes," the nurse spoke sharply. "Here, let's have a look at her eyes."

Natina didn't hear the voices around her, only the ones in her head, and they were booming in her ears.

"We know all about you . . . you'll do all right. Now get out of my sight!"

Suddenly the lights were brighter and Natina saw three people bending over her and doing something. Then they stood back and covered her face with a white sheet.

"Was it a heart attack?"

"No. She couldn't breathe . . . maybe pneumonia."

There were two other people in the room, but they were different. Natina watched them, as a white-jacketed doctor entered and consulted with the nurse. Then he checked the body on the bed. She wasn't interested in what was happening to the body, but followed the two strange, but familiar-looking people out of the room and along a well-lit corridor. The two didn't pay attention to her, although they had clearly seen her and left immediately. The nurse, doctor and the two ambulance attendants completely ignored her and were talking together when she left the room. Now everything had a subtly different dimension and Natina had an overriding imperative to find a new body and to escape before they came for her. She didn't know just who they were, but something deep down in her memory told her that she had to escape from them . . . she had to find another body . . . but how?

* * *

13:25-06 MAREN 1604-8N5

There was an impressive electrical storm raging outside as the two women discussed their planned move to OT-63 and the various considerations involved in maintaining a low profile.

"We're keeping our internal communications to a minimum, and the security people are monitoring all signals coming from Artra. . . ."

"Excuse me for a moment, Molien," Rinim raised her right hand slightly as an old woman entered from a hidden door. "Come in Fran. You know Molien Eauueb, don't you?"

"Yes, My Grace," the old woman bowed slightly, "Peace be with you, Sister Molien."

"Do you have something important, Fran?"

"Only to you, My Grace, if I remember correctly, you wanted to know about the status of Sahlie Lor, or more correctly, Kruminah B'Tziah."

"Yes. Have you something for me?"

"Only that she's been found since slipping away from our monitors. She was identified by a Necro-Classic observer on another part of the planet. She died of a respiratory disorder and has entered the body of a local infant for the time being. From all indications, her grey-shield concentric shroud is still in place, although it is possible that it can develop faults during the short course of the body's growth and maturity."

"Oh. How is that?"

"The local organisms are short-lived and their growth and maturation rates have an undefined effect on abnormal shrouds, such as the grey-shield. Personally I think it was wrong to put our sister in a grey-shield in the first place, especially on a complex venture of this type."

"What do you mean by that, Fran?" Rinim motioned for her to sit down. "Is there something I should know about her activities on this world?"

"Oh, her activities aren't difficult, or dangerous, My Grace," Fran answered, sitting opposite the two women. "She's expected to take part in a segment of the pre-retrieval procedure for our colonists on that world. The problem is, that her role must now change because of the body she illegally entered."

"Was it destined for someone else?"

"Yes. It was marked for one of our Tachael agents, but his gamma-complex was withheld at the last moment because the infant-organism wasn't expected to survive the birth process."

"The infant did survive, then?"

"Yes. It was placed in a primitive incubator and survived despite mitigating factors surrounding the birth. There were twins, one male and the other female. The nephish she entered was pre-coded for specific functions, which are different from her own. This will cause us some problems in the future, especially if her concentric shroud ruptures prior to its designed schedule."

"What was the Tachael's function to be?" Rinim spoke softly, wondering what it was Fran was holding back.

"He was part of a 10 unit cell, the kind which we use on this type of operation that consists of nine of our sisters and one Ansharim Brother. Now it will be a cell with ten of our sisters, one of whom will be in a specially pre-coded nephish."

"Will that endanger the operation of the cell?"

"No. But it will complicate things. You see, the four primary individuals, who comprise the 'trunk' of the cell, are paired together in close working units. Two women, the captain and her adjutant, are to work on the structural adjunct of the operation, while the Tachalet and his field assistant are to work on the communications adjunct. Unfortunately, the kind of personality which we use for the adjutant in this kind of operation is one who is a performer at heart . . . and somewhat unreliable unless she can work extremely closely with her male counterpart. In this case, her male counterpart is male only in the physical sense; otherwise, she will be dealing with another sister who hasn't been trained for the function."

Sitting back, Rinim thought for a moment. "Can't you introduce this Tachalet into another body to continue with his mission?"

"I wish it was so easy, My Grace. The answer is no. You see the cortex module that was entered into the infant's brain, two weeks prior to birth, cannot be duplicated, at least not within the time parameters open to us. The module was developed expressly for our Ansharim brother, and cannot be duplicated on short order. He is effectively out of the show for at least 50 years, and we suspect the recall will begin long before that. In fact, I'm led to understand the second warning is about to sound and special decisions will come about within a year or two."

"How many of these cells are in this operation, Fran? And, how many of them are backups for others?"

"There are 100 specific cells, with three backups for each of 25 primary cells. The cell Kruminah's adopted body is assigned to is a primary cell. Unfortunately, there's a storm brewing on Odomah-Tek that could conceivably wipe most, if not all, of them out. The state of their technology leads us to believe we're in danger of losing our entire recovery force within the next 20 years. It appears the black ones have targeted our light bearers for extermination with just that idea in mind."

"What was it Kruminah was coded to do, Fran?"

"I would rather not discuss that, My Grace."

"Would you prefer I left while you two discuss this subject?" Molien started to rise.

"No." Fran waved her down. "It's not a secret you're not privy to. It's just that I have reservations about the assignment, and feel constrained when discussing it."

"What is her assignment, Fran? I want to know the real facts here," Rinim spoke slowly, looking Fran directly in the eyes.

"She is to be a traitor and divulge many of our secrets to the enemy."

"Are these real secrets, or those we suspect the enemy already knows?"

"They are as you say, not really secrets, but Kruminah wasn't supposed to know this."

"And. . . .?"

"It all depends on how in tune she can become with the cortex module installed in the nephish's brain. If she can align herself with it, she will know about more recent events and will have a Necro-Classic tie with our control unit. She will be able to discern many facts that aren't actually directed toward her, but enough to figure out what is going on."

"So, she will do what she's coded to do, both her own function and the Tachalet's."

"Come now," Rinim chided, "she can't know anything more about his mission than what's contained in the cortex module. There isn't any way for her to guess at his actual training, is there?"

"Yes, there is, My Grace. She has a quarter of a million years experience, and is an unevolved binary seven. Still, she has all her early memories from Sham-Shoah, Borgdragon, and a wealth of naval CIC experience that will alert her to the realities of the situation . . . that is, if her grey-shield concentric shroud ruptures. It would be better if the entire shroud came apart, then she'd know what to do and override her coding to commit treason. But, a rupture leaves things up in the air, and fragmentary memories could be damaging. We can only hope her sense of conscience and loyalty will override our coding. The only other option would be to retrieve the existing cortex module and re-implant it in another fetus."

"You don't plan to have her assassinated, do you?" Rinim asked pointedly. "If that is being considered by any of our Council Central's departments or our Necro-Classic Authority, then I expressly forbid it!"

"Batdor Zell has beat you to that decision, My Grace. She feels the same about such matters, as do all of us in our Security Group. It is not the way of the Ginger and the Rose to permit such

travesties of justice, and we are hard-pressed on the matter of our Sister Kruminah having been put into her present position in the first place."

"I'll have to see Zell about this entire fiasco," Rinim nodded. "Will you discuss the matter with her for me?"

"She has already suggested the same thing, My Grace. After your impending move, she plans to join you for a space of time since she has many things to discuss privately. Our sister Kruminah is important to her . . . you know they were shipmates together long ago when Sahlie Lor was an officer under the command of Sister Gale Robel."

"Yes. I'm aware of that, Fran. Please pass on my feelings to Batdor. I truly look forward to her company."

"I will surely do that, My Grace," Fran stood up and bowed. "I must leave now. Thank you for allowing me this audience. Peace be with the two of you."

"Peace be with you, Sister Fran D'Loumot."

Chapter 9

S.A.D.

Ross Markel was credited with destroying Josargon's giant battleship during the Great Conflagration . . . now we find him again facing a superior enemy force and doing what he knows best . . . fighting to win. . . .

13:47-13 NOAIM 1604-8N5

Twelve warships of the Galactic Common Confederation's second, 'Markel', squadron of the XXXIXth Battle Fleet, broke into temporal space four light years from their targeted star system. This group of 16 stars, noted on their charts as TRN-33480Y.1-16, was located on the leading edge of the seventh arm rim. The latest allied intelligence reports indicated a large enemy buildup in the area and increasing warship activity near the closest star, TRN-33480Y.6, which had four habitable planets orbiting it.

The squadron hadn't been in temporal space more than 10 minutes when the first indications of enemy ships began to appear on their long-range radars. It seemed like Sargon's warships were waiting for them, and Admiral Ross Markel didn't waste any time dispersing his squadron in their prearranged attack formation. He was here on a search and destroy mission, and now was a good time to begin the fight.

Markel was an old warrior from a long line of Odomak naval officers, who knew he'd been credited with destroying Josargon's giant battlewagon back in 6192-7N5. He was one of the few G.C.C. officers who knew the secret about the Necro-Classic Authorities which had retrieved his soul and administered his rebirth; the

knowledge of which he felt was given to him as a true affirmation of his loyalty. Otherwise, he had no illusions about himself that would get in the way of his common sense or order of priorities. Ross Markel was, first and last, a frontline naval officer who had a job to do. He considered himself a first-class professional, and nothing more. He'd hand-picked his entire crew from the best of all races, and pushed them to excel in every quarter. Still, he knew without being told by G.C.C. security, or anybody else, that the black ones had infiltrated every level of the allied navies including the Admiralty itself. Their Jerden agents were so well-trained and conditioned that it was literally impossible to identify them and weed them out. So, being a prudent man, Ross Markel never disclosed his real plans to anyone until the last moment. He relied on his commands' high state of training and combat readiness to make up for the absence of early briefings and to enable them to respond to last minute orders with precision. This was one reason he had fewer casualties than anyone else and a greater kill ratio of enemy vessels.

Immediately before entering temporal space, Admiral Markel issued last minute orders to his squadron forbidding them from activating either their defense shields or cloaking systems. In addition, he ordered all ships to be prepared to drop back into the sub-binary on a 15 second notice, and for their captains to draw Battle Plan 19B from their security vaults and open them immediately after reentering the sub-binary. He suspected that the cloaking and shielding systems, which were a carbon copy of captured enemy equipment, were somehow responsible for the enemy's uncanny success at penetrating the G.C.C. naval defenses. There had been a Nashramh intelligence analyst on Admiral Feany's staff who voiced this opinion to him just before she disappeared. Markel remembered this child-like security woman, not because she looked so young, but because she had a fantastic command of the enemy's Borg language and code systems. Gad, he would give his eyeteeth to have her on his staff! The only person he had, who even came close to her, was his sexy-looking CIC command officer, Commander Angela Crosby, who looked more like a fashion model than a naval officer. Angela's only drawback was that she triggered Markel's passions and hidden fantasies, making him feel tense and uncomfortable in her presence. Of course, this was his problem, not hers. Otherwise

Angela was the best CIC officer available in the XXXIXth Battle Fleet.

Markel's flagship was the 92.8 kilometer-long light cruiser 'Delotanis', which supported a complement of 9,400 officers and crew. His screen of destroyers consisted of three 42 kilometer-long lead destroyers and eight Class III, 'Goland-Teral', 36 kilometer-long fleet destroyers, all of which were built to the latest specifications and used copies of captured enemy offensive and defensive equipment. Each vessel had the power to effectively damage, if not kill an enemy ship of its own class. Acting as a team with others, they could destroy their opponents without sustaining damage to themselves, and the days of ramming the enemy in a desperate suicide attack were now long past.

"We're closing at 80 percent flank," Captain Havlan Corol spoke out, repeating his first officer's readouts, as the ship's radar signals increased in intensity and tempo.

Everyone on the Delotanis' darkened bridge was tense and the increasing rate of the radar signal beeping from the monitor's audio unit increased their tension. Things were going to be moving so rapidly that only error free, split-second timing would make the difference between success and failure. To fail was to die.

The nine enemy battle cruisers were closing with Markel's squadron as the opposing warships rushed headlong into a frontal attack. Now it was evident they were expected and the Admiral smiled to himself, knowing he was going to get his licks in and then run like hell. He knew what he was going to do. They didn't.

"Patch me into primary laser communications, Havlan," Markel instructed, "and address me to comm-D circuit numbers 18 through 29."

Captain Corol complied immediately and handed the Admiral a special handheld microphone.

"This is Markel Trans-4-0-2, code 54. Implement plan Med-3-tan-0-9, now!"

Havlan Corol, who was standing next to Markel, relayed the instructions to his bridge and battle sections. The first phase of Markel's plan was sound, but the second phase hadn't been disclosed yet. Havlan would know this when he opened his sealed envelope containing Battle Plan 19B after they completed this phase and dropped back into the sub-binary.

Handing the microphone back to Captain Corol, Markel nodded. "This is it, Havlan."

"Yes, Admiral, now we can get our own licks in and make them hurt."

Admiral Markel's battle plan, which he'd just communicated to each ship's captain personally over a closed channel laser network, was scheduled to last only six minutes and 23 seconds during the first stage, after which they would drop back into the sub-binary and proceed to the next phase as outlined in Battle Plan 19B. During all his briefings before embarking on this mission, Markel had stressed the need to confront the enemy battle cruisers and inflict as much damage on them as possible. It was to be a stand-up battle with no quarter given. Actually, he had no intention of really challenging the superior enemy warships, only engaging in a harassing gesture and then making for their home port and destroying it before leaving the area for another sortie at an as yet undisclosed target. Only he alone, knew the location would be the same facility he'd just hit, only this time he would strike when the black warships returned, then run like hell after inflicting as much damage as he could. It was a sound plan and contained the elements of surprise in all three phases.

Commander Angela Crosby watched her gridscreen as the nine enemy cruisers closed in. Then without a word, she pressed her primary countermeasure sequencer relay control. Waiting 30 seconds, she began to manipulate a top secret scrambler generator that was supposed to screw up the enemy's tracking systems and cloud their counter-measure signals. Only she and old 'uptight' Markel knew how the system worked, and she made sure that her CIC staff concentrated on their own specific assignments.

The light cruiser, Delotanis, shot forward as her 11 destroyer screen spread out to meet the attacking enemy warships. Each vessel fired long-range torpedo canisters containing special radar scrambling gear and Magna-Therm warheads. The three lead destroyers deployed two lifeboats each, while the Delotanis released six of the 900 meter vessels. The lifeboats shot away from their mother ships and automatically extended their protective shields and cloaking screens. Each lifeboat was fully automated, and built without life-support systems. In short, they were armed robots stuffed with the gigantic machinery needed to create the advanced shielding used by the enemy. The Nashramh hadn't

incorporated the enemy's cloaking or shielding systems into their warships, since the vessels were far too small to accommodate the machinery. This, they found out later, was why the enemy had never been able to track them. The alien-designed protective shields had an element built into them which identified them to Sargon's special monitors; thus G.C.C. vessels were easily tracked when these systems were in operation. Ross Markel didn't know this, but somehow determined that his shields had been tampered with. He kept them deactivated on his ships and only activated on the drone lifeboats. Luck and intelligence served him this day, and he took full advantage of the situation.

Immediately after releasing the robotically controlled lifeboats, Markel ordered his squadron to drop back into the sub-binary. Fifteen seconds later, only the drones and torpedoes remained in temporal space to combat the on-rushing cruisers. The captains of the second squadron then opened their sealed copies of Battle Plan 19B and proceeded to the next phase of their attack, the fourth planet from the nearest sun, TRN-33480Y.6d. Preparations for both planetside and orbital assaults were completed before their arrival four hours later.

Emerging from the sub-binary at their predetermined coordinates, the 12 warships proceeded to attack everything in sight above the grey-green planet. Two enemy battle cruisers were caught by surprise and the Delotanis, along with three of her sister ships, attacked them with Magna-Therm torpedoes and super high-gain lasers of the enemy's own design.

The opening salvos tore into the nearest enemy warship and ignited gigantic secondary explosions along the leading 50 kilometers of the vessel, lighting up the void in blazing flashes.

"Leave that one to the destroyers, Havlan," Markel spoke quickly, "the other cruiser's shields aren't up yet."

"Helm, make for the second battle cruiser," Captain Corol responded without taking his eyes off the bridge's giant gridscreen.

The Delotanis' bow swung 15 degrees to her starboard side and made directly for the enemy vessel. The bridge's radar tracking screens picked up the outgoing signals of 25 Magna-Therm torpedo canisters as they shot straight for the giant black warship.

"They're right on target, Admiral," Corol spoke calmly. "Helm, bring us two points off his port quarter, now!"

"Two points off port quarter confirmed," the helm technician's voice called out.

The second cruiser was raising his defense shields when a bright blue detonation tore the entire bow section into a blinding mass of raw power. The explosive force literally spun the 240 kilometer battle cruiser in cartwheels and down toward the planet's surface. The G.C.C. squadron shot past the two enemy cruisers and continued their attack on the orbiting supply stations and 100 cargo carriers, while the remaining seven destroyers attacked surface installations with Magna-Therm torpedoes and long-range laser beams. Four cargo carriers were blown to pieces, while two more were seriously damaged by both laser fire and torpedoes.

Markel's squadron dropped back into the sub-binary and scattered in directions outlined in their battle plan. Behind them, planet TRN-33480Y.6d was in turmoil, and a blinding flash lit up the void a few seconds before the Delotanis submerged into the first sub-binary level. Angela recorded the magnitude of the burst, from the opposite side of the planet, and deduced that the battle cruiser had impacted on the planetary surface. There would be death and destruction all over the world from that disaster.

"Dear God," she thought to herself, "what has this all come to those poor people. Oh God, how I hate this damned war."

Without warning, the second squadron burst back into temporal space above TRN-33480Y.6d, and made for the nine battle cruisers orbiting above the stricken planet. The tenth cruiser was experiencing internal explosions and raging fires, making it an easy target for the destroyer, 'Haloriks', which sent 42 Magna-Therm torpedoes into its already ruptured hull. The resulting detonations caused the giant vessel to burst into shattering explosions that tore it completely apart, leaving only millions of swirling chunks of debris spinning through the void.

"Forward torpedo sections, one through five, have fired their first spread of torpedo canisters, per schedule Beta," the fire control officer's voice rang out. "We'll have first impact verification in 65 seconds. The second spread of torpedo canisters is now being fired. . . ."

"Deploy mines, now!" Captain Corol spoke into his comm-link. "Aft torpedo sections six and seven, fire five spreads per schedule Delta as we clear each enemy vessel."

"The third spread of torpedo canisters is being fired now, and we'll have impact verification in 15 seconds."

Markel's squadron made for the nearest enemy cruisers and gave them everything they had, tearing terrible gaping holes in their hulls and setting off internal havoc, but not effectively destroying any of them. The enemy warships hadn't dropped their defensive shields and, this alone, saved them from destruction. Otherwise they were taken by surprise and weren't able to effectively retaliate, saving Ross Markel's squadron from being seriously damaged. Eight more cargo carriers were destroyed and three badly wounded by the G.C.C. raiders.

"Our battle damage reports indicate only superficial hull penetration, Captain," the first officer spoke clearly amid the humming and buzzing of the bridge's hundreds of human voices and electronic equipment. "We've suffered 115 casualties; 52 dead and 63 wounded."

"Yeah, 115 too many," Havlan Corol muttered.

The planet below was in a disastrous state, nearly one quarter of its northern hemisphere having been directly affected by the exploding cruiser. The atmosphere over the devastated area was covered by a spreading black and grey cloud, laced with glowing blue and violet gases. It was obvious, even to the casual observer, that no life remained on that part of the planet. From all appearances, the poisonous emissions from the catastrophe would shortly snuff out all life on the stricken world. Admiral Markel had only moments to notice this holocaust, and felt sick to his stomach. Slaughter of civilians, innocent or not, wasn't in his scheme of thinking, and now this filthy damned war had degenerated to raw murder. The glaring fact that this was to recur over and over again, despite his personal feelings, made him feel trapped. There was no other answer . . . either surrender to the invading aliens, or perpetrate this horror in order to fight them off. It was a no-win situation.

"They're stiffening up their formations, Havlan. Signal our ships to disengage and return to base," Markel nodded.

Captain Corol spoke clearly into his comm-link with a slight smile briefly crossing his face. "Torpedo section one, fire the blue

flares per schedule Delta. CIC, verify that our signal is acknowledged by all vessels and report the fact to me immediately."

Fifty seconds later, Commander Crosby's voice sounded over the open comm-link. "All signals conforming to schedule Delta acknowledged and verified, Captain. Our 15 second countdown will begin on your command."

Markel nodded toward the Captain and smiled. "We've done all we can for now, Havlan, so let's get out of here."

"Engineering, commence sub-binary insertion procedure, now," the Captain spoke calmly, hoping that nothing would go wrong to mess up this successful raid.

* * *

As the giant enemy cruisers showed signs of forming into an effective battle group, Markel ordered his squadron to disperse, and all shot into the sub-binary again to run from the area. Nine G.C.C. destroyers had sustained light damage, and to everyone's surprise, not only hadn't they lost any vessels to the enemy; their casualties were also extremely low. The element of surprise and speed won the day for them. The enemy fought back with their usual superior techniques, but the second squadron hadn't stayed around long enough for the enemy gunners to be effective. It was also apparent that four of the enemy vessels were struck by the drone lifeboats and Magna-Therm torpedoes back at the initial point of hostilities, although the damage seemed superficial. The ruse and use of robots had worked well enough to throw Sargon's commanders off balance and to confuse the situation adequately for the raiders to safely attack their home base. Markel doubted this tactic would work again, but one real success per tactic would be enough, providing he could devise equally effective plans for his future operations. Now it was time to return to his base and refit for the next go-around.

As in all battles, there are the enemy commander's views of the action . . . which don't always coincide with ours. . . .

Battle and damage reports were arriving from throughout the CONVOR-LOSET-II Group's XXth Light Cruiser Squadron to the central bridge on the 'Sogmak-Haas', describing a growing list of casualties. Grand Superior Heulaer-soun Braeler was mildly

impressed by the enemy commander's cunning use of surprise and his doubling back to compound his advantage.

Yes. It was a clever move, although not totally unexpected; it was well-executed and timed with a sound understanding of the Lightprobe Unit's battle order. The enemy commander had certainly earned Heulaer-soun's respect with this successful raid into the XXth Squadron's base. The raid was thought out and executed in three well-coordinated phases; the initial ploy using robotics, the primary attack on his base, and return attack to seal the victory. The plan definitely had merit.

Heulaer-soun turned to his combat intelligence monitor and studied the profile on Admiral Ross Markel. The man had a record of daring actions and possessed some degree of intellect, although not enough to compare against a Lightprobe officer of any rank. But still, he was well worth watching. Obviously this Admiral Markel was aware that his command structure had been infiltrated, and therefore kept his own counsel with regard to actual battle plans. His obvious diversionary instructions to his staff and fleet captains weren't a surprise to anyone, but his actual plan was. The question that crossed Heulaer-soun's mind was whether Markel would be foolish enough to attempt the same maneuver twice? He doubted it. A second question bothered Heulaer-soun and would have to be looked into: did this Ross Markel know the XXth Light Cruiser Squadron was operating at less than half strength, or was his attack on the undermanned unit merely good fortune? Yes, this question would have to be considered very carefully.

Two Light Cruisers had been destroyed with the total loss of 2,000,000 officers and crews. Two other battle cruisers were badly damaged, with 300,000 known casualties, and unable to move into the sub-spec for at least three years. His seven remaining cruisers sustained superficial damage and were fit for extended combat while the actual casualty list for the cargo carriers was relatively light in material damage. More than 926,000 casualties had been inflicted on their crews.

"My Lord. I respectfully confer the latest summary of our battle losses for your consideration," High Captain Maefoer Gando-loet spoke softly. "The planetary surface will soon be a total loss. The 'Gross-Langer's' primary pile disrupted after impact and the products of its reduction are contaminating the atmosphere with

both radioactive material and Solnor-Matrix particles. The entire economic investment population is lost to us for at least 5,000 years, according to Master Touran-saer."

"I will consider this data for the moment and await your final analysis before transmitting it to our Sweet Sargon. I expect your analysts have made an accurate identification schedule of each of the enemy's attack vessels?"

"Yes, My Lord. We are confirming our data now and trying to discover their next course of action. Our Jerdens aboard their warships are encountering difficulty obtaining accurate information. Apparently their commander, Admiral Markel, has withheld vital data from his senior officers until the last moment. Our agents are attempting to penetrate his private files and computer banks to learn about his intentions."

"I see," Heulaer-soun nodded, noting the damage inflicted on his own squadron by the enemy raiders. The enemy couldn't penetrate his assembled combat groups with enough force, even with equal weapons, to destroy them. It was only when their shields were down, or they were alone and outnumbered, that his Light Cruisers could be seriously damaged or destroyed. Measures would be initiated to prevent this from happening again. Each engagement with the enemy produced a new dimension which could be countered and prevented in the future. In time, the enemy would run out of new ideas and resort to their tried-and-tested techniques. Then the end would be in sight. Time was on Sweet Sargon's side. Superior intelligence, perseverance, and time were the elements that would conquer all of Sweet Sargon's desperate opponents.

"See to it that we are ready to move to Onscour IV in 70 hours. This base will be of no use to us for the time being. Notify Grand Superior Jerif-mout Nesraeb of our schedule and request a personal meeting between us when we arrive there."

"Yes, My Lord," High Captain Gando-loet replied, clicking his heels. He then turned and left.

Heulaer-soun turned back to his combat intelligence monitor and reviewed the course of the enemy attack from his personal performance analysis group.

Far below, glowing radioactive clouds, laced with deadly Solnor-Matrix particles, were spreading agonizing death to 'Marunoe-Trax's' entire ecological system and its teeming human population.

No living organisms, either plant or animal, would escape this terrible fate, and Heulaer-soun regretted the loss of the available technological manpower which the planet had produced for Sweet Sargon. According to his latest figures, only 6,000,000 members of his Legion of Light's professional staff were evacuated from the planet's surface. Another 9,000,000 were expected to be removed before all other life was snuffed out. This left him with 4,600,000 casualties from the initial impact area and its surrounding support zones.

Fortunately, the Gross-Langer crashed in the least populated quadrant and his Legions of Light suffered relatively few losses. The 6,000,000,000 local inhabitants were an unfortunate write-off and would be replaced in the next ten to 20,000 years. Setbacks were unfortunate prices of war that had to be minimized or Sweet Sargon's timetable would be upset; this could not be allowed to happen under any circumstances. Ways and means of preventing enemy raids into 'Lightprobe Investment Zones' and staging worlds had to be developed. It was apparent that the primitives were changing their tactics and avoiding fleet confrontations, while targeting capital investment zones. The effective use of Jerdens and their associates would be redoubled to secure new investment projects on undeveloped worlds. The Lightprobe project must be accelerated as soon as possible to offset any enemy successes in this zone.

The XXth Light Cruiser Squadron's six mainline warships spread out in higher orbits and formed into two units of three. The raging fires and numerous detonations on the two badly mauled battle cruisers were being brought under control by well-disciplined and dedicated damage control crews. The Sogmak-Haas remained in low orbit with its two wounded battle cruisers and the fleet of cargo carriers. The wounded cruisers would remain in orbit above the dying planet along with 10 armed cargo carriers. Once the battle cruisers were ready to make the voyage to Onscour IV, and rejoin their squadron, the 12 vessels would proceed to their destination in the second sub-spec plateau. Five additional cargo carriers, which had been mauled in the attack, were to remain in orbit above Marunoe-Trax until a cleanup fleet arrived to reclaim all salvageable machinery and other property from its dead surface.

The seven warships and 82 cargo carriers of the XXth Light Cruiser Squadron left orbit above Marunoe-Trax and proceeded to their targeted destination at Onscour IV, leaving a dying planet behind. Grand Superior Heulaer-soun Braeler had much to think about on this three-month voyage. The desperate enemy forces were changing their tactics and, more than likely, their overall strategy. They apparently intended to strike at planetside manufacturing and technological investment areas rather than face the Lightprobes' assembled fleets. Disruption of the investment facilities and tactical bases was not to be tolerated. New countermeasures and counterstrategies would be placed into effect immediately or he and his officers would be remiss in their duties. This was certainly an interesting prospect to deal with, and he felt it would be an excellent challenge. Maybe he could draw the enemy commanders into well-designed traps, using special investment zones as bait. This would certainly facilitate their rapid annihilation. Yes, this aspect would be well worth considering.

Chapter 10

Meeting

There are many important junctures in history which go unnoticed in the hustle of everyday activity . . . but few are vital to implementing long-laid plans affecting the fate of entire worlds. . . .

10:15-06 MAREN 1605-8N5

Tea was served by a short, grey-haired Austrian man who worked as both a domestic aid and gardener for the Weiss household. Frau Weiss, the mistress of the house, remained silent as he poured tea into the eggshell-thin porcelain teacup and handed it to Telly.

"That will be all, Herr Inquart," she smiled. "We wish to be alone for at least two hours."

The old man nodded, then turned and left the room without comment. Turning to Telly, Frau Weiss gestured toward the door and laughed softly. "Herr Inquart is related to that terrible man Seyss-Inquart who is bent on turning Austria over to the Germans. He's a good man but has to appear anti-Semitic at heart. Otherwise he would be charged with being a Jew lover and ostracized by some of his more partisan relatives and their political associates. Herr Inquart has provided me with a large amount of Nazi literature which he buys openly; thus he appears to be one of their sympathizers while I receive their material without being noticed."

"Do you trust him?"

"Yes I do. He served in the Great War with my husband, and they've been close friends for years. But, you must understand

that being employed by Jews isn't regarded as a noble business. He must offer the Nazis bits of useless information about us to offset this problem. They think he's one of their kind."

"I take it, then, he serves as your eyes and ears among these Nazis."

"You might say that."

Telly sipped his tea, wondering if it was drugged. He really didn't know who this Frau Weiss was, nor why she sent for him. How she knew he was staying in Berlin and where to find him was definitely a mystery.

"No, the tea isn't drugged, my dear brother," she smiled. "I realize you don't know me and are wondering what it is I want."

"The idea has occurred to me."

"Well, dear Herr Hartman, or more correctly Herr B'Mesziah, I'm also a member of the Sisterhood."

"The Sisterhood? Could you elaborate, Frau Weiss."

"Certainly. My title here is 'Sarah of Vienna', and I'm a controlling member of the XVth Marker Section of our Sisterhood's Necro-Classic Authority. Although you've not been informed of our organizational structure, you are definitely aware of both our existence and two of our local names. Our mutual friend, Raphael, visited this world nearly 6,000 years ago and took part in positioning our special markers. Your identity has been known to us since we were informed of your arrival back in the 13th century; during the winter of 1206 CE to be exact."

Telly smiled and laughed. "I suppose you knew me then. I was a soldier and moved around a lot."

"No. You were a minstrel at the time, and I didn't know you. I've been told you were a slippery character who could relate the tales of the times without error."

Telly sat back and studied the old woman carefully. Her dark eyes were bright and clear, but otherwise she was grey and fragile. Her long face was definitely Jewish in appearance, although her mannerisms were strictly Austrian and smacked of class.

"You're probably wondering just why I summoned you here, to Vienna," she began, setting her teacup down. "There are two reasons, dear Telakin, if I may address you as such. First, I wish to inform you that the woman known as Solah-nim, or Natina Calinis, for whom you are searching, is no longer living in Bremerhaven. She escaped to the United States last year and died there of

pulmonary pneumonia. She has since been reborn into a new body and will remain under our surveillance. I don't know why you were searching for her, but as a child she'll be of no value to you."

"And the second reason?"

"As I told you, I am known on this world by the title of Sarah of Vienna and I'm a member of our Sisterhood's Necro-Classic Authority. When we were first assigned here, more than 5,000 years ago, we were given various assignments, one of which was to watch for specific signals emanating from both the enemy and our own sources. As you well realize, we're all stuck out here beyond our Sisterhood's and the G.C.C.'s operational control limits with virtually no direct contact with our command centers. Thus, my organization's intelligence section is charged with specific responsibilities that overlap into the military sector, although we don't engage in battle. Our intelligence analysts have been alert to the signs of the times and the possibility that an enemy takeover is imminent. We've identified two specific signals which can't be interpreted in any other way than the beginnings of that takeover; thus we've taken our prescribed action as outlined in our prime directives."

"The soundings of the Shofar, I presume?" Telly nodded.

"You presume correctly, dear Telakin. The first sounding, back in 1881, resulted in our decision to begin the movement back to the region of the well, which is now gaining most of its momentum from secular sources. Now this emergence of Samael's Bora-Daron Cross and the invasion of the Nazis, who wear it into the Rhineland, is a clear signal of the second sounding."

"Have you begun a second movement toward the region of the well?" Telly asked, studying her dark eyes.

"No. I've called for a 'Meeting Extraordinary' to be conducted here in Vienna during the High Holidays. Members of my order will assemble here secretly to determine the course of our next move. We have never had a meeting of more than 10 of our members at any time since we first arrived, more than 5,000 years ago, but this is truly an emergency. You see, we believe the calamity has already begun and we'll be eliminated as an active force on this world."

"Has the enemy discovered who you are?" Telly gasped.

"They know of us as the 'Watchers', but don't know our individual identities. Karl Haushofer, their watcher in Munich, knows there is a messenger being sent here to us from our central

headquarters, although she hasn't arrived yet. Since the black watchers can't weed us out individually, they propose to murder all living Jews and Gypsies in order to nullify our presence. They know our two peoples are singular in that we travel widely and don't assimilate into the local population. Thus, they think that by destroying all Jews and Gypsies, they'll have gotten us as well. In truth, they may well do just that. If they do nothing else by destroying the House of Judah, in part or altogether, they'll confuse and possibly nullify the other 11 houses which have assimilated into this world's population."

"What you're saying is overwhelming, but I know it's true," Telly spoke softly. "What do you propose to do to counter them?"

"We intend to train a cadre of 'Sud Rabbis' who will disseminate certain parts of our program after the first phase of the calamity is over. Then, through these special teachers, we'll authorize the writing of a number of our documents and the dissemination of many of our secrets by means of fictional literature and the lively arts. In this way they'll have personal deniability while accomplishing their desired end. Then, if we're destroyed as a living organization, our basic knowledge can be passed on to the other 11 houses until we can reemerge in corporeal bodies again and restructure our forces."

"How long do you think that will take?"

"At least a century . . . probably longer. You can't imagine how difficult it will be to restructure after a major calamity since the enemy already knows a great deal about our presence. He will devise means to confuse us and to corrupt our newly born sisters. You see, this emergence of the black ones in force is only the beginning of the process. Our experience with the Legions of Light has taught us that this stage of emergence is only a forerunner of things to come . . . a preparation for a total takeover. They'll use this period to consolidate their holdings and to improve their technological base before completing their takeover. Science and technology have been allowed to grow at a moderate rate, but will explode geometrically after this second war has been concluded. I don't doubt the Nazis will be used to initiate many a scientific break-through before they're defeated, but then, that's the general pattern."

"Do you actually think they'll lose the war?"

"Of course, they can't possibly win it with their limited resources in both manpower and material. Their purpose is the same as the Kaiser's was . . . the restructuring of the balance of world power into more definable limits. Their counterparts in Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the Americas will win the apparent war, but will continue on with the black ones' thrust toward central world control. Both the Great War, and the second one, which is in the making, are only the opening skirmishes in their move for a larger takeover; a planting of the final seeds."

The two continued their discussion for another hour and a half before parting. Telly understood that Frau Weiss didn't expect to survive the conflagration and in a way he felt sorry for her. It wasn't her impending death that bothered him, but the destruction of the deep-rooted organization she so dearly loved that was tragic. She knew exactly what was going to happen and couldn't do a thing to save her thousands of sisters from certain death. He was glad she had invited him to this beautiful city of Vienna, to attend the Meeting Extraordinary where he could meet some of these wonderful and dedicated women.

Something she said really bothered him though. Many of the daughters of the survivors were expected to defect from their duties and assimilate into the general population. This had occurred before on other worlds, and would probably happen here. Telly was a military man and couldn't imagine anyone defecting from his or her sworn duties . . . it just didn't happen in the Nashramh or G.C.C. navies. But then, this wasn't the navy nor a military organization. These were women of the 'Mission' who were civilians brought from many different cultures to serve with the Nashramh's Necro-Classic Authorities. The actual Necro-Classic operatives were a fundamental part of Nashramh security and these sisters were totally dedicated to their roles, but their associates were made of much less valuable stuff. Some would be so shallow and foolish as to be attracted by the cheap glitter of a baseless society and would turn their backs on their sworn duties. The very idea made him feel sick to his stomach.

The Sud Rabbis were another story though, and had to be made of better material since they were to be openly exposed to the public eye, and therefore were expendable.

Telly decided to walk to his hotel since he had a great deal to think about. The entire atmosphere of this beautiful city now

depressed him and he could visualize its occupation by the black enemy in the form of strutting Nazi soldiers. Little did these handsome and seemingly civilized people know what was in store for them. "God," he thought to himself, "what a filthy mess!"

How Sarah's associates could meet in any kind of numbers without being noticed was a problem that interested him. According to her account, there were about 1,500 living sisters in her order, and one in every ten would be present at the meeting. No doubt the women would be accompanied by their husbands, and possibly children, to disguise their reasons for visiting Vienna. It wasn't clear to Telly whether all of these people were Jewish, or only a small number of them. For 150 Jewish families to suddenly come to Vienna from all around the world, at one time, would certainly attract attention. Well, he would soon find out.

Frau Weiss wasn't home when Telly arrived for his appointment with her and he checked his pocket watch to make sure he wasn't late. Her maid apologized for the apparent mix-up and suggested he return later in the day when Frau Weiss would surely be home. Telly began to wonder if something had gone amiss when a young man, about 19 or 20, climbed the steps to the front door where he was standing.

"Guten morgen, Herr Hartman," he smiled broadly, offering his hand. Then in English, "I am Michael Rosen and I'm to escort you to your meeting. Please don't be concerned that Frau Weiss isn't home. She will meet with you later."

"I'm sorry Herr Rosen, but nothing has been said about a meeting, nor am I sure you have the right person."

"Oh, you're the correct person, Herr Hartman. You will be pleased to come with me and enjoy the sights of our beautiful Wien."

Telly never liked taking chances with strangers, but decided to accompany the young man to the so-called meeting.

"Well then, Herr Rosen, please lead on."

"Good, good, Herr Hartman. This way please."

The two left Frau Weiss' home on Rathaus-Strasse, turned left on Grillparzer Strasse and walked two blocks to the university and turned left again, walking casually along Richtstrat-Strasse for seven or eight blocks. They turned left again from Turken-Strasse to Lichtenstein Strasse and continued to the middle of the block.

"Do come in with me, Herr Hartman, there are several people here who would enjoy meeting with you."

Young Rosen led the way up a short staircase to the ornate front door of an obviously well-to-do household. The door opened as they arrived, and a middle-aged maid took their hats and topcoats.

"This way, sir," Michael motioned as they walked through a set of double doors into a salon occupied by three elderly women, one of whom appeared Oriental.

"May I introduce Herr Gerald Hartman from the United States." Michael spoke out clearly, then without further comment, left the room closing the double doors behind him.

Telly bowed slightly, clicking his heels. "I apologize for not knowing your names, but I am Gerald Hartman as the young man has stated."

"We know who you are Mr. B'Mesziah," the youngest woman smiled. "I am Rachel, this is Leah, and my Chinese sister is also Leah. These are our titles, and we will not disclose anything further about our identities to you. I believe you do understand the reasons for this precaution, Mr. B'Mesziah."

"Yes, I do."

"Good. You are most welcome to our meeting, but first, allow me to explain a few things to you."

Rachel went on to detail how the Meeting Extraordinary was being conducted. All of the 150 plus participants, and their seconds, had been arriving in the city over the past four months and most of the business at hand had already been dealt with. This, the 15th day of Nissan, was the final day of the meeting when the completed resolutions would be ratified. After this was accomplished, all of the members would leave as they had come, over a period of time, thus taking no undue chances of being discovered.

"You see, Herr B'Mesziah, not only do we filter our numbers into the city, we never congregate in numbers exceeding ten. As you will see, we have many meeting places located around Vienna and our members circulate amongst them in a seemingly random fashion. Neither the Austrian authorities nor the local citizens have the slightest idea of what we are about, much less that we are even here. Our meeting hall is broken into more than 15 parts, but is contained in this beautiful city all the same."

Telly laughed at the simplicity of the operation. There really wasn't any reason to congregate in some great hall and attract undue attention. These women really knew what they were doing.

The next four hours were spent in another room with seven other women, none of whom appeared to be either Jewish or Gypsies, where each article that had been agreed upon earlier was voted on and ratified. He was most impressed by the total absence of written documentation. Everything was dealt with orally and recited from memory with nothing being left out. If he hadn't actually been there, he would have no idea of what was agreed upon. "No wonder," he thought, "they've been able to keep their knowledge and identities a secret for so long." Thinking back to the beginning of the meeting when Rachel recited the reaffirmation of her order's allegiance where she spoke of the second warning. . . .

"It is now, with the second sounding of the Shofar, and in our greatest moment of peril, that we must speak out. . . to be heard by our living sisters and brothers and all of our generations . . . for we must prepare them to return to the hand of our Compassionate Mentor to be judged for their worthiness. For each of us, no matter what race or nation we have blended with, is aware of our Covenant and our Laws and of our Sacred Mission . . . and each of us knows his or her personal responsibility for the collective destiny of our people and the suffering races of this world . . . and each of us has our promises to keep.

"We know that we are truly strangers in this strange land. Our roots are spread out into the heavens, and our branches, laden with the fruits of our lives, extend throughout this endangered world . . . and we are given to the compassionate service of mankind. . . ."

The softly spoken words brought tears to Telly's eyes as he remembered his own oath of dedication, made at HaZevah, so long ago. These women of the Mission and their Necro-Classic sisters were truly strangers to this land and had nothing but their wits and dedication to serve them. As a military man, he had never really dealt with this organization who oversaw the millions of off-world seedlings and those others stranded here from the period of the Great Conflagration. Now he understood a little of both their immense strength and their hidden weakness, and this knowledge disturbed him more than he realized at the time.

* * *

Our best laid plans don't always pan out. There is always some mitigating circumstance, or unforeseen calamity to disrupt our path, and we must always take this into account when planning a mission. . . .

11:40-15 ARKEM 1607-8N5

The incessant buzzing of swarms of irritating flies, hovering in black clouds over the dusty roadbed, awakened her conscious mind from its hidden recesses. A white hot noonday sun bore down on the parched and cracked soil, choking off all movement of air and scorching the silent, bloated bodies of lifeless men and women scattered along the empty roadside. Beneath the cloudless autumn sky, a single dead mare lay beside an overturned wagon with its precious cargo of human effects strewn around it. The day wore on as the frenzied turmoil of bloated flies hovered and buzzed. There was nothing else.

Something irritating was crawling on the woman's right ear, forcing her mind to focus on a single point. After a long space of time, she suddenly awoke and without thinking, struggled shakily to her feet. An overwhelming sense of consciousness flooded into her mind, activating a confusing string of overlapping memories and emotions. At her booted feet, lay a twisted corpse of someone unknown, its face buried in long, dry grass, the right arm covering the back of its head.

Looking slowly around, the woman counted 38 bodies of men and women; there were six children scattered among them. She absentmindedly noticed that she was dressed in men's clothing similar to several of the others nearby, as well as the corpse at her feet. Why this was, she couldn't guess, but then it really didn't matter. Everything was deadly still, except for the buzzing of the swarming flies.

The woman began to walk along the dusty road, past the overturned wagon and dead horse, and continued for about two kilometers before coming upon more corpses and luggage strewn about. Without stopping, she continued to walk along the lonely road until dark forms in the distance came into view. She continued walking as the terrible white sun turned yellow and began to set along the horizon, casting long shadows over the

bleak countryside. The dark shapes formed into random houses, then the outskirts of a village.

It was dark when the woman finally arrived in the village, although she had no trouble seeing the signs of burning and violence. During the entire course of her journey she'd thought of nothing, only casually observing the empty landscape and cloudless sky. Now she had something important to do. Her memory began to clear. . . .

Yaegel Levi whispered softly into his wife's ear as she wrung her coarse red hands in desperate grief.

"He'll be all right, Rachel. He'll be all right. The Eternal will protect him. Can't you see, he's still breathing? See?"

"My son," she wept, "my poor innocent son. Oh, they have hurt him so, oh, my poor baby."

"We will take him to Mokotow, Rachel. There is a good doctor there who will see to his wounds. He will recover when we take him to the doctor. Come now, let him sleep in peace. Come. . . ."

Twelve year old Nathan Levi lay breathing irregularly, his wounded head bandaged by his mother's loving hands. The stone thrown by the village boy had struck him on the left temple and left him unconscious for two days now. Death hadn't claimed the boy yet, for his breathing had become more regular and the fever suddenly diminished, bringing his temperature back to normal.

Nathan awoke in the darkness of that early morning, his head throbbing and his mouth dry. Somehow he didn't feel the same as he remembered and his body felt wrong. He felt old and tired, the fabric of his mind weighed down with a terrible responsibility, the memory of which seemed to be just out of reach. Then, he remembered who he was.

Nathan Levi had always been slow to learn and many in the family thought he'd been born without all of his wits. His mother, Rachel, had faith that her youngest son would one day awaken and be a bright and normal Jewish boy. She taught him to recite the Kadish and to read the little Hebrew that she knew while his father worked at the shop tanning leather. Life was hard for Rachel and Yaegel since they left their home in Sevastapol when the threats against Jews became intolerable. Oh, it wasn't as bad as the pogroms of the Tsar, that forced many Jews to leave the Russias during the last 70 years, but it had been difficult. Now it was starting all over again and the village boys nearly killed her

little Nathan; and there were the aeroplanes attacking from out of the sky without warning. She'd heard that many people, who were fleeing from the west, were killed while on the open road and their bodies hadn't even been buried.

Rachel knew this was the calamity her mother told her about; yes, this was the time when death would rain down upon all of the House of Judah and the second sounding of the Shofar would be heard. Now it had begun and no one would escape.

* * *

Telly sat listening to the large radio set in Tina's living room while she prepared lunch for the two of them. The German armies were now in their third day of advancing into Poland and it appeared it would be over in another day or two.

Earlier in the morning, something happened inside his head, something extraordinary, but not readily identifiable. It almost seemed as if he'd been shot in the back and then there was that damnable sensation of a fly crawling around on his right ear. Now he had a confused feeling of awakening with a bad headache. Then the sensation was over and he knew he'd experienced something more or less ethereal and this was somehow connected with the situation in Poland. It would be years before he discovered the significance of this strange sensation, but by then it would all make sense.

Chapter 11

Dispersal

We of the Nashramh haven't ever been in a position to fight anything other than a guerilla war against our black enemies, since our warships are too small and too few to mount a credible frontal action.

Our counterparts in the G.C.C. navy have insisted on mounting fleet actions against the enemy, even after the disastrous losses in the Great Conflagration . . . but, now after taking heavy losses along the rim, even they could see that a change of both strategy and tactics were in order. . . .

02:30-28 DEMIN 1605-8N5

Death and destruction out in the void were not new concepts to Apprentice Mess Mate Holmarak Groujob of the Talomosian deep probe scoutship, 'Noubelat-bor'. Holmarak had taken part in two hit and run actions involving ships from the Galactic Common Confederation's XVIIth Battle Fleet and survived both engagements. His vessel was badly mauled in both actions, while other G.C.C. warships hadn't done so well. According to his section chief, Sub-Lieutenant Lieport, most of them had either been blown to atoms or wrecked so badly they had to be scuttled. The enemy invaders were tearing up the small battle squadrons because of their larger numbers and incredible firepower.

The XVIIth and XXXVth Battle Fleets were now moving into a known concentration of enemy cruisers with a clear advantage in numbers and firepower on the G.C.C. fleet's side. The combined fleets were made up of 26 heavy cruisers, 49 light cruisers, 214 fleet destroyers, and 95 deep probe scoutships. The use of large

numbers of long-range scoutships was becoming more common since the Great Conflagration. They had smaller crews and were less costly to build and maintain. The G.C.C. never fully recovered from the overwhelming losses of men and machines during the desperate battles against Josargon's invading hordes. The cruisers and destroyers were all armed with the latest ordnance, and the heavy cruisers had fantastic laser generators that were said to equal anything the enemy had.

According to Sub-Lieutenant Lieport, the enemy fleet was made up of about 60 battle cruisers and 20 auxiliary craft. Whatever their numbers were, Holmarak didn't feel he would survive this encounter. He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach he hadn't experienced before, and now it almost overwhelmed him. He couldn't ever forget his wounded and dying shipmates from previous fights, when he served as a medic after their ship was hit time and again by enemy fire. The terrible radiation burns and disemboweled bodies of the men and women showed the horrors of war out in the void. Still, Holmarak had his duties to perform. No ship could operate efficiently with an ill-fed crew. The quality of his section's services reflected on every man and woman's performance during these long years spent out in the lonely void. The mess sections were, in a way, a reproduction of the warren-kitchens in their homes. Every effort was made to preserve that close atmosphere of nesting-broods that everyone so treasured. So Holmarak set his mind to preparing special rations for the day's operations, since they were going to be entering temporal space in an hour's time and would probably be in a fight shortly after that.

The Noubelat-bor and 94 of her sister scoutships broke into temporal space and immediately raised their defensive shields and cloaking screens before fanning out for their pre-planned targets. They had to make first contact with the enemy fleet to determine his actual numbers and dispositions. Combined Fleet Admiral Hoskort, on the heavy cruiser 'Inmoad', didn't trust his intelligence reports, considering them to be shy of the enemy's actual numbers by at least 20 percent. In fact, he was sure of it, and had prepared his multi-plane dispositions and reserves to account for a larger opposing force than the intelligence people estimated. Now the screen of scoutships were making for the enemy's known ports and opening the first stages of the conflict.

Something was definitely wrong and Captain Emon Tobot was alarmed. There was only one enemy battle cruiser where a dozen should be, and only two auxiliary vessels that appeared to be freighters of unknown vintage. Without hesitating, he ordered Communications to break radio silence and report his observations on their special sub-binary battle frequency. It didn't stand to reason that the bulk of the enemy's ships would be conveniently out of port at the moment a major attack was being staged unless he'd been forewarned.

"We're being jammed, Captain!" the communications officer shouted over his comm-link. "They know our battle frequencies and have us locked in!"

"Engineering, drop into sub-binary phase one, now!" Tobot barked out into his comm-link. "Withdraw shields and cloaking screens as soon as we submerge."

"Affirmative, Captain."

The Noubelat-bor dropped into the first sub-binary plate and altered course after shutting down her shields and cloaking screens. Captain Tobot always suspected his shielding systems and only extended them on the express orders of Fleet Admiralty. Now that he was on the run, he wasn't giving the enemy a single clue.

"Drop to the seventh plate when the navi-computer's synchronized," he spoke quickly to the engineering section, "and bypass the cooling cycles."

Turning to his second in command, Sub-Captain Yogan Onsoat, Captain Tobot gave a tired smile. "I've never run from a fight before, but this is a trap. We've got to get clear of their jamming and warn combined fleets about this situation. Get down to communications and coordinate our multi-band transmission, and make sure nothing goes wrong. We've got to get the warning out before they break into temporal space."

"I'll take care of it, Captain," Onsoat replied, turning immediately to leave.

"Torpedo sections, prime your ordnance for long-range curved trajectories and set the fuses for impact. Mine sections, prepare for immediate dispersal at 360 by 10 on my command. Be prepared to release on five seconds notice."

The section commanders reported their status was "go", as the captain continued to issue specific orders.

Dropping down to the seventh plate without going through the interim cooling cycles and then returning to the fourth plate where un-garbled transmissions could be made, was a risky business, since the sub-binary drive's cooling systems were subject to overheating and possible failure. Captain Tobot couldn't afford 18 hours to cool those systems, even at the minimum safe operations cycle, since there wasn't time to do so. He had to warn combined fleets of their dangerous position, and prevent an enemy ambush. Going down to the seventh plate without cooling cycles was suicidal, but was by far the fastest and probably best method under the circumstances.

* * *

Bright starfields lit up the forward Combat Intruder Control Group's two kilometer-long curved gridscreen that stood 900 meters high. The fully cloaked Lightprobe battle cruiser 'Vorboer-Morogot', of the CONSOR-HAPOR IV Tactical Group's XIXth Light Cruiser Squadron had been on station for seven days, waiting for the enemy's warships to arrive in his patrol sector. Twelve million kilometers off the Vorboer-Morogot's forward left flank, a tiny blip appeared on the giant screen and was immediately lit up by a bright yellow rectangle surrounding it. Instant readouts from the combat intelligence computer flashed below it, identifying the intruder as the Talomosian scoutship 'Noubelat-bor'. Additional readouts appeared on 4,000 individual monitor screens located throughout the immense Intruder Control Theater, and 1,000 other screens on the battle cruiser's bridge.

Fifty fully cloaked expendo-fighters immediately dispatched to intercept the enemy vessel and powerful radio jamming signals were focused in the immediate area to disrupt the Noubelat-bor's emergency distress signal.

The expendo-fighters hadn't cleared their hangar when the blip disappeared from the grid-screen. The enemy commander had quickly surmised something was wrong in the vicinity of Talsoun-mar, the planet around which the Lightprobe fleet should have been in orbit, and dropped back into the first sub-spec plateau without hesitating. Considering the distance between the two warships, the enemy craft would probably outrun the expendo-fighters.

Specially coded signals were sent out to CONSOR-HAPOR IV Tactical Group's flagship, the 'Sargon's Life', located in the ambush zone, alerting Grand Superior Jean-coul Laured of the incident and the action initiated. Even if the Noubelat-bor did escape capture or destruction, her radio signals would be jammed by the pursuing expendo-fighters and any Lightprobe vessels in the line of passage.

* * *

Sixteen minutes before the combined fleets were scheduled to break into temporal space, Sub-Captain Onsoat's high-pitched croaking Talomosian voice sounded over the multi-band sub-binary battle frequency, warning of the trap lying ahead. Within seconds the signal was jammed. He had entered the emergency prefixes before reciting his message orally to facilitate speed, since fleet cyphers would take at least seven minutes to decode and verify. When minutes counted, he had to break normal code procedure and warn the fleet orally. This helped avoid total disaster. Admiral Hoskort knew instinctively that Onsoat's message was legitimate.

Admiral Zan Hoskort didn't waste time issuing orders to his combined fleet. He'd issued five special sets of documents to each of his primary division commanders, which required them to open pre-sealed emergency orders that took such a situation into account. Now he instructed each division's admiral which document to open. Thus, neither the enemy nor anyone in the division's flagships knew what the plans were. In turn, each divisional admiral instructed his captains to open specific sealed plans for their new attack profiles. All of the combined fleet's warships effectively altered their courses and broke into temporal space at their new locations, avoiding the enemy trap.

Once the Inmoad entered temporal space, and extended her defensive shields, Admiral Hoskort proceeded with his alternate plan of attack. His fleet was already distributed in a three dimensional checkerboard array that permitted immediate support to any wing engaged with the enemy. Zan Hoskort wanted to gang up on any black warships he could and outgun them. This avoided past problems where his forces couldn't muster enough firepower to kill the huge enemy cruisers.

Light flashes, not less than 1,000,000 kilometers distant, alerted the combined fleets of the enemy's presence exactly where

they were to initially break into temporal space. A Talomosian scoutship, the 'Changomor', had popped into the midst of the black warships and fired a spread of torpedoes and mines before being blown to atoms. Three hundred and thirty flashes were counted by CIC observers as torpedoes and mines collided with the enemy ship's shields. There probably wasn't any damage inflicted on the enemy vessels, but their exact location was marked.

"We've got confirmation that the Changomor engaged the enemy fleet, Captain," Lieutenant Costain Urek spoke out, while continuing to study his monitor unit. "Since their radio transmissions are being jammed, they've fired a spread of mag-flares in four sets of 10, and a set of two red."

"They've got 42 warships," Captain Soured confirmed. "That's definitely not their entire fleet."

Admiral Hoskort studied the situation board for a moment before replying to Regan Soured's statement.

"No, it isn't, Regan. No doubt they've divided their forces to protect their bases from us, and more than likely into reserve units. At least that's what I'd do. Notify the first and third divisions to commence with their attack."

Captain Soured complied without hesitation, making sure his communications officer received the correct coded response from the two divisional commanders before closing his transmission.

"We'll keep the second, fourth and fifth divisions in reserve for the moment," Zan Hoskort spoke clearly; studying the gridscreen. "We don't want to commit all our forces on the first sub-fleet we encounter. I'm sure the enemy commander split his forces and is waiting for us to make our move. Forty-two ships is too small a force to send against us, considering the efficiency and accuracy of their intelligence gathering network. No, there are more of them waiting out here, either in the first sub-binary plate or under cloaking screens that we can't detect."

"I agree, Admiral, they've got more out here than that little sub-fleet."

"We'll just have to wait it out while the first and third divisions make a fight of it. I have a feeling we're in for a few surprises and a hell of a scrap before this day is over."

The first and third divisions had their hands full with 42 enemy battle cruisers that fought with calculated efficiency and inflicted terrible losses to their G.C.C. antagonists. Admiral Hoskort ordered

his fifth division to reinforce the embattled first and third, and was about to direct another division into action when 70 black cruisers suddenly emerged into temporal space between him and his embroiled fleets. Zan Hoskort pulled the plug and committed everything he had in reserve to attack the newly arrived warships. Strangely enough, they didn't seem to be aware of his attack until the last moment, then all hell broke loose. The G.C.C. vessels converged on the assembled battle cruisers, launching tens of thousands of Magna-Therm torpedoes and firing their powerful lasers into the enemy's extended shields. At first they appeared to inflict real damage to the black cruisers, but the enemy's shields suddenly extended further and intensified geometrically in their power output.

The Inmoad's giant laser generators produced fantastic concentrations of focused energy against the closest enemy cruiser, cutting through his shields and into his hull with deadly effect. Hundreds of secondary explosions were clearly visible on Admiral Hoskort's gridscreen and the enemy vessel came apart before his eyes. Streaking past the stricken black cruiser, the Inmoad attacked the next in line, firing everything she had into the shimmering shields. A bright flash in the aft screen signaled the death of the first cruiser, then the Inmoad took a direct hit amidships, tearing a gaping hole 80 meters across into her bowels. Then it happened: the enemy's battle shields extended out by at least 50 kilometers and strengthened. The Inmoad's lasers weren't penetrating them any more!

"My god!" Soured gasped. "What've they got? We can't even touch them!"

"Signal code blue!" Hoskort yelled out, "Disengage now!"

Captain Soured's command to signal the retreat hardly left his lips when the communications officer was sending the signal. A spread of blue mag-flares was fired to counter any enemy jamming of their radio signals, and then the heavy cruiser made a run for safety in the sub-binary. The Inmoad's interior power faded for a moment, then she dropped out of temporal space and began her escape maneuvers. Something in the ship's sudden change in atomic structure disrupted the raging fires amidships and saved the heavy cruiser from more serious damage. This was one of the few blessings encountered on the Inmoad during the entire day.

By the time Admiral Hoskort and his commanders realized what happened, they'd nearly fallen into the enemy's trap. Powerful jamming signals made any form of radio communications impossible and the darting maneuvers of the allied vessels made laser contact prohibitive. The spread of blue flares didn't make any difference since Zan Hoskort's planning had again envisioned such a catastrophe and, without further orders, each surviving warship disengaged and dropped back into the sub-binary. Those who were damaged too badly to make a run, fought on to the very end, trying to confuse and damage the enemy as much as possible. Within five minutes, it was all over.

Only 19 heavy cruisers, 37 light cruisers, and 66 fleet destroyers escaped the initial slaughter. Intelligence data confirmed that 29 black cruisers, from the first encounter, were destroyed and five from the second encounter. Other than that, the G.C.C. combined fleets inflicted serious damage to 28 percent of their opponents during both encounters, and light to moderate damage to 52 percent of the rest. In all, the combined fleets lost 164 warships during the fight; 48 of which were scoutships. The enemy lost 34 battle cruisers. Of the 169 surviving G.C.C. ships, 141 had to be abandoned and destroyed, while 24 were badly mauled. Only four scoutships avoided damage, and these were the ones able to escape the enemy and radio their sightings to the combined fleets. All of the signals had been jammed except for the Noubelat-bor's, which literally saved the fleets from certain annihilation in the enemy's trap. More than 322,000 men and women died and another 69,000 were badly wounded.

Holmarak Groujob could hardly believe his little scout-ship had actually come out of a major battle unscratched. At first, everyone thought they'd acted as cowards, since they ran from the scene, but they soon learned otherwise. Admiral Zan Hoskort personally came aboard to thank all of them for their gallant efforts and success at warning the fleet in time to avert a total disaster. He also visited the other three scoutships that managed to send out their signals, although they were jammed. It was their foresight and daring that made any communications with the combined fleets possible in the first place, and he knew it.

It was time to rethink their overall strategy and Admiral Zan Hoskort was responsible. He, and his counterparts at Fleet Admiralty, knew that the day for frontal attacks on enemy fleets

was over. The price was far too high and the results negligible. The G.C.C. Combined Navies had to approach strategic warfare from another angle that would be costly to the enemy without being suicidal for the allied fleets. There would be a change, and it would take on a new form for all naval operations.

* * *

Scattered remnants of the battered enemy fleet dropped into the sub-spec, leaving 115 fully disrupted warships behind in both the main battle arena and the numerous areas where scoutships were encountered. From Grand Superior Jean-coul Laured's initial combat intelligence reports, at least 135 escaping enemy ships were rendered militarily useless and would probably be scuttled. Of the remaining 34 vessels, only four of the scoutships were undamaged. Apparently the enemy commander, Admiral Zan Hoskort, had received one of his scout's radio transmissions before it could be effectively jammed. His last minute redeployment of forces saved his fleet from being totally wiped out and resulted in an unacceptable number of Lightprobe losses.

Reviewing his latest combat casualty report, Jean-coul noted that three of his heavy cruisers, 26 light cruisers, and five destroyers were totally disrupted and 42 had light damage. Twenty of his light cruisers were seriously mauled and would require extensive refitting and repairs once their damage control groups suppressed the fires and explosions raging in them. The enemy fleet, although thoroughly defeated, had fought surprisingly well during the short engagement.

Grand Superior Jean-coul Laured's flagship, Sargon's Life, had engaged the enemy commander's vessel, identified as the Heavy Cruiser, 'Inmoad'. The skirmish was short-lived and his gunners scored a direct hit on the Inmoad's port-amidships laser section, completely destroying its massive generators. Only the Admiral's quick decision to break off the engagement saved his vessel from sure destruction. At least the man had enough sense to know when he was outclassed.

Jean-coul addressed his combat intelligence monitor and began to review the personality profile of Fleet Admiral Zan Hoskort, whom he'd studied many times earlier. The man acquitted himself admirably during the battle, and would serve as an interesting opponent in the future. Aside from Hoskort, the five primary

division admirals and their ship's captains weren't much more than savage warriors who fought with fanatical ferocity, but didn't really understand the finer points of long-range strategic planning. In fact, their lack of imagination and tactical knowledge was absolutely appalling to the point of incompetence.

Jean-coul smiled, thinking of how he would have handled the situation had he been one of those divisional commanders, or ship's captains. There was a wide range of available tactical maneuvers and special diversions that could have been used to great advantage. But then, these were mere savages who stood their ground and hacked away at their superior enemies.

Reflecting on the enemy commander's single-minded attention to facing the Lightprobe fleet in a frontal attack was a mystery to Jean-coul. Hoskort was intelligent enough to split his forces and maintain reserves, but it was odd that he hadn't attacked any of the Lightprobe commercial investment sites as a diversion, or as a secondary objective. He expected Hoskort to attempt something like this, so two squadrons of light cruisers were detailed to set traps at four of the closest bases which were evacuated enough to serve as bait. Possibly the Admiral suspected this course of action and chose instead to focus his assault on the Lightprobe fleet. The Jerdens attached to the enemy warships had done their jobs well, and the trap nearly succeeded; only the warning from one of those little scoutships saved Hoskort's squadrons from total annihilation. The use of small scoutships was a new innovation that could be easily countered by employing large numbers of expendo-fighters to hunt them down and destroy them.

* * *

Battles out in the void constitute only a small segment of the massive conflict raging all along the sixth and seventh rim arms, and each action involved individuals caught up in terrible straits that none had any real control over. On the planetary surfaces, millions of smaller wars were being fought that seemed to be of local origin only. Upon closer scrutiny, there was clearly a link that even reached young children destined for a cruel slaughter.

06:30-19 JERIN 1610-8N5

Nathan didn't remember much about the trip to the relocation camp, except that everyone was crushed together in the stifling railroad cars so they couldn't even sit down. It was so hot he had difficulty breathing, and felt dazed and weak. How long he'd been in this condition, he didn't know, but it seemed like a long time. He wasn't sure what was happening except his mother awakened him in the middle of the night and helped him dress. She was terribly upset and spoke of leaving their house for some sort of resettlement, or something of that nature. There were strange men waiting out in the street who pushed them into a large wagon along with some of their neighbors.

Nathan was the last to enter the back of the wagon and could see Mishca, their family dog, following them for a short distance until he was driven away by one of the strange men.

The boy was pressed against his aging mother, and he could see the dark fabric of her dress, almost as it were an entire world in itself. In the dim light of the crowded boxcar, the cloth took on a surreal appearance, its faded yellows blending with the dark rust-colored brown and off-white. The texture and blending colors fascinated him and brought back ancient memories of other times and places to his fevered mind. The patterns had a hypnotic affect on him and he could see images of different faces woven into the fabric, all staring back at him. Some seemed familiar, while others frightened him and he closed his eyes trying to hide from them. But then, the brief memories and images would slip away and elude him as the train wheels clicked and clacked over steel tracks, and so it went until they at last reached the loading area at the relocation camp, and the train slowed to a stop.

It was cloudy and nearly dark when they arrived at the railhead. There was a confused unloading of both people and belongings, with each family desperately struggling to stay together. There were black-uniformed soldiers, some restraining vicious-looking dogs on leashes, waiting outside as the great doors slid open and people tumbled out onto the hard ramp. At first, everyone milled around and got their things together, then columns were quickly formed and the people began moving along the tracks toward buildings barely visible in the distance. Nathan noticed a dark guard tower behind them, under which the train

had passed into the camp. There were men in striped suits cleaning out the railroad cars, and loading larger parcels onto trucks. Someone said their baggage would be taken on ahead and returned to them after they were processed by the authorities.

It began to rain, adding a somber effect to the strange place, and everyone in the slowly moving line waited to see what would happen next. Some of the smaller children were crying, while the older boys tried to appear brave. Even the tired and bewildered adults tried to conceal their fear from the children. Actually, everyone was terrified of the black-uniformed men and their terrible barking dogs, which they kept under control with short leashes.

After walking for some distance, the lines of people stopped and then moved along very slowly until they were confronted by a tall, immaculately dressed German officer with a cane in one hand. To their left, there were rows of long, low buildings, although they weren't very clear in the near darkness.

The Levi family advanced to a position in front of the tall officer, who walked back and forth while looking at each of them with an air of playfulness, mixed with a sense of superior intelligence. Nathan's father, Yaegel, was directed to the right with a wave of his stick, while he, his mother and two sisters, were directed to the left.

Nathan noticed that most of the men were segregated into one group, while many of the women were shuffled off to another. The remaining old men, women and children were herded off to the left, toward low lying buildings on the other side of the railroad. He could see what appeared to be high smokestacks, of what someone said was a factory, behind them. Nathan stepped away from his mother and looked at the dark crowd of men standing a short distance away, searching for his father's face in the grey mass.

Nathan heard a strangely accented voice, apparently directed at him.

"You, come here!" the tall officer spoke out to Nathan, seeming to notice something peculiar about him.

Nathan obeyed the man and stepped away from his mother for a moment. The officer, noting that he was small for his age, was concerned about his fair complexion and light-blond hair.

"You will go to the hospital block."

Nathan was taken to a building where his clothing was removed and his hair cut short, although not shaved off like other people around him. A tattooed number was inscribed on his right forearm. He was never to see his family again after that fateful evening.

The woman doctor who checked his pulse and made a thorough examination of his health, instructed Nathan to remove his shoes, striped shirt and trousers and to await the Herr Doctor.

He recognized the tall, good-looking officer from the ramp beside the train, the evening before, although the man now wore a spotless white coat over his black uniform. The windows of the room had been opened prior to his arrival, and the air was cool and fresh, accenting the odor of cologne which he used on his skin.

"So this one doesn't measure up to the line," the tall doctor nodded to his female assistant. "Still, we have good reason to study him."

"He is very blond, Herr Doctor," she responded, thinking that was what he meant.

"Blond and fair complexion, yes. But there is something more to this one. Yes, something different about the eyes."

The woman instructed Nathan to lie, face up on a table while the man studied him carefully. Then, the tall doctor produced a hypodermic needle and carefully injected a blue substance into each of Nathan's eyes. The pain was excruciating, but for reasons unknown to the boy, he didn't scream out. He heard a soft voice from somewhere inside his head that reassured him everything would be all right and he shouldn't be afraid. For some reason his senses sharpened, and he listened carefully to everything that was said as the injections were being administered.

"Come now, young man, we know who you really are. Now we shall bring you out of hiding."

After studying the results of his injections, the doctor seemed disappointed, almost angry.

"Doctor Mengele, there is a transport arriving in 30 minutes. Do you wish to administer the selection?" a man spoke out from somewhere to the side of the room.

"Yes. I'll be with you in a moment," the doctor responded, then, turning to his assistant, he ordered her to remove the eyes and prepare them for shipment. Then he left the room.

Nathan didn't understand at the time just what had happened, but the woman doctor seemed to disappear and he found himself

dressing, then walking out of the room and, of all things, out of the building. There was a definite force that engulfed his very being, and he could see more clearly than he ever had in his entire life. Where he was going, he didn't know, but he followed his own feet as if he were a mere passenger in his own body.

Nathan Levi was now the messenger and no longer in control of his own destiny. The woman's spirit that entered his body, two years earlier, had now taken over and was exercising powers totally unknown on this primitive rim world. Nathan Levi literally walked out of Auschwitz II, known as Birkenau, and although his eyes were infected and he'd become sightless, he blended in with everyone he met and was never challenged for his identification or destination. The enemy had been clearly seen and identified, and now the messenger knew what to do. A holy alliance had been made between the messenger and Nathan Levi that became more than a mutual friendship, and would propel him back to the realm from which he had come so long ago.

Chapter 12

Influx

Not all humans look alike, nor do they always have two arms and legs as we do. Take, for example, the Ubornot warriors from Chaumor-not IX who patrol our outer rim defense zone beyond QRT-69004T on the trailing edge of the sixth arm. . . .

11:20-16 MAREN 1610-8N5

The five kilometer-long Chugorot battle destroyer, 'Yor-gonot-Roe', lay dormant in the void six light years beyond the QRT-69004T star system at the trailing edge of the sixth arm. All external shielding systems were shut down and only the coarse grey-cast hull sheathing could deflect probing radars. The Yorgonot-Roe appeared to be nothing more than a big chunk of porous debris floating in a cloud of lifeless dust and wispy primordial gases. The battle destroyer didn't fit normal specifications for G.C.C. naval warships, and its 100 officers and crew hardly resembled anything human, although they were both G.C.C. allies and human in every respect. The Ubor-not warriors who manned the vessel were a fierce and hardy race of arachnid-like creatures from Chaumor-not IX, the primary star system of the Chugorot League. Their standards of life and technology were crude, if not primitive, compared to other G.C.C. allied systems. Even so, they were intelligent, brave, resourceful, disciplined, and loyal beyond question. As fighters, whether in the jungles of their native world or out in the void, they were cunning and cruelly efficient. Nothing frightened them and no possibility for attack ever escaped their attention.

Now they lay in wait, patiently scanning the void for any sign of enemy activity. G.C.C. Admiralty had ordered them to post themselves in the vicinity and remain there with their battle shields and cloaking systems extended to full capacity. To post themselves out in the void as observers was common sense, but to waste massive amounts of precious energy on shielding and cloaking in a non-combat situation seemed like sacrilege to these conservative creatures who still thought they were laying jungle ambushes. So, they did what they knew best: they blended in with the natural terrain, a cloud of debris and primordial gases.

Doloum-Truoma, the Master of Cunning, known by other navies as a Combat Intelligence Officer, noted the 86th group of 66 enemy battle cruisers to enter his zone of observation during the past calendar year. They performed the exact course corrections as their predecessors and then dropped back into the sub-binary, heading for a point in the seventh arm. Doloum-Truoma was informed that this same pattern was occurring all along the sixth arm, and to date, there were 15,000 of these enemy sub-fleets observed entering the Starset and moving to specific locations on the outer rim. Thus, at least 990,000 enemy warships had entered the galaxy in one year. This was an invasion fleet that couldn't be stopped, because it was approaching gradually and dispersing to undisclosed bases. If the enemy were attacked at any of his entry points, as had already happened, then he merely altered his schedule and point of entry. Nothing was ever gained by trying to intercept these intruders. They had large enough forces to challenge and beat any G.C.C. fleet sent against them, providing any large fleets could be assembled on short notice to fight at dozens of locations at one time.

Doloum-Truoma focused his long-range optical monitor on the black sub-fleet when it emerged into temporal space, and studied the external characteristics, noting everything the eye could see. He also made chemically activated photo plates of his observations for later analysis by his Masters of Vision. He avoided all electronic gear in his study and analysis of the enemy vessels, thus avoiding detection. Everything he did was mechanical, chemical or optical, although his measurements were infinitely accurate. Nothing escaped his concerted attention.

"Present your vision, Doloum-Truoma," Wakayim-Truotin, the ship's Captain, demanded in her guttural voice of command.

"I envision six and 60 unclean presences passing through our zone of responsibility, Truotin-nah. They repeat the path of their predecessors and depart to rim-mark four and 19 of round of seven as spoken truly by Unobon-Truome."

"Prepare a sign for our allies that they may benefit of our vision, Tudark-Truomo," the Captain addressed her communications officer. "Sing of our vision in our secret tongue, that none other may know of our sign."

Unobon-Truome, the Navigator, rechecked Doloum-Truoma's observations for the third time and noted them in his navigational log.

"I have made a true count of the placement of the unclean presences for Tudark-Truomo to make his sign, Truotin-nah. Truly Doloum-Truoma's vision has substance and merit."

"It is well," the Captain agreed, then turned to her First Officer. "Come, Eudono-Truomin, make speech with me of our long-laid words."

The slow moving arachnid-like Ubornot officers were deceiving to the outside observer, since their primitive speech patterns made it appear that they had no technology. Contrary to this outward appearance, they were deep thinkers and extremely innovative technicians whose science was strangely different from conventional G.C.C. societies. The Ubornot civilization was, first and last, a military organization that channeled its energies toward mathematics, mechanization, and a narrow range of technology that resulted in their eventual exploration and conquest of their own star system. They had effectively turned their martial energies away from fighting one another and toward the conquest of primitive planets beyond their own sun. They avoided populated worlds and concentrated their efforts on fierce and untamed places where their affections seemed to lie.

The Chugorot battle destroyer remained on station, patiently watching the black enemy enter the Starset Galaxy in greater numbers. Sargon's Legions of Light were laying the foundations for a new invasion on a broader front, with a different strategy for their renewed attempt at conquest.

Arden Ardel leaned over Commander Meiben's shoulder and watched the strange glyphs appear on his translator screen. The Chugorot destroyer's encoded signal was directed toward the G.C.C.'s Rim Area Defense Station at Cesnoe III, and was

intercepted by the deep probe scout destroyer TU9310 Corbol's high-gain dish antenna. This report, along with their own observations, began to develop a clearer picture of the enemy's overall strategy, to create core bases along a wide area on the sixth and seventh arm rim. The enemy was obviously securing planetary systems, which they invested thousands of years to develop, from which to move further into the Starset Galaxy when Kutulusargon gave the order. The enemy's plan appeared unbeatable, especially if the G.C.C. were to meet these scattered sub-fleets head-on to stop them. It just wouldn't work.

"I wonder how the Chugorots keep from being detected, Arden?" Dan Meiben spoke out. "They must have the same shielding systems as other G.C.C. warships."

"I doubt it," Arden replied. "Their ship is only five kilometers long and not very sophisticated. From my meager knowledge of those swamp fighters, they probably have all their external electronic systems down. They don't distinguish much between a swampy jungle floor and debris floating around in the void. They're probably so obvious that Sargon's boys can't see them. They're damned tough and resourceful critters, those Ubornot warriors. Really resourceful, you know. They can move through any kind of terrain without making a sound, even though they're ungainly to look at and heavy enough to crush you by sitting on you. Their lumpy shape, eight appendages, and dark coloring gives them damned good camouflage too. They're clear thinkers and can out-plan and outmaneuver everyone and everything they come up against. Believe it or not, all of their senior officers, from captain up, are females."

"Sounds like an interesting place. A dark swampy world lit by a burned out red-liner."

"Oh, Chaumor-not IX, in the QRT69004T star system, is quite alive. It has two co-orbiting stars with different colors. The largest is a star called Chau-not, and is a dull red-liner, that's orbited by a smaller white-line star named Mor-not. Their home world, Ubornot, is an Soltra-like planet with one large orange moon, called Sug-no, and a smaller outlying moon named Ruk-no. The massive gravitational forces exerted by the two co-orbiting stars and their two moons have an exceptional effect on the planet's atmospheric configuration and ocean tides that makes life on the surface interesting, to say the least."

"I can imagine," Dan nodded. Obviously Arden had memorized his Galactic Atlas.

"Yes, and the planet has five major low-lying and mineral rich continents, most of which is covered by dense tropical forests with fern-tree-like vegetation. All of the continents are pockmarked with countless lakes and slow moving streams that make the settlement pattern of their highly evolved society possible. The vast shallow oceans that lie between the continents are green and alive with plant and aquatic forms."

"No shortage of food, I take it," Dan wondered aloud, "but how about the diseases usually found on swamp-laden worlds?"

"Well, they have their share, but nothing that ever slowed them down. The dominant Ubornot race rules both the land masses and oceans with a strange, almost maternal, system of military government. The three sub-races, also human, are both intellectually and physically inferior to the Ubornot warriors. Even so, there's a system of interpersonal and social conduct that provides a workable and interesting system of justice for everyone; superior and inferior alike. Only the Ubornots are allowed to bear arms and serve in the ruling military establishment. Otherwise, the three inferior races deal in all lower levels of government, as well as in trade, science, education, industry, and other social and economic functions. They're really a fascinating bunch of critters when you get to know them; with their eight appendages and all."

"You amaze me, Arden. I don't care what subject we discuss, or what race, no matter how obscure, you know all about it."

"Oh, I've been around a little," Arden smiled, "and besides, I read a lot."

"So do I. But you still amaze me. Your recall is phenomenal. Wow!"

"It's all image, Dan. Don't be fooled by my practiced manners. I'm only human, you know."

"Sure. What do you think about this massive influx of black sub-fleets? Are we really being outmaneuvered again, and . . . well, in line for a real defeat?"

"We're just being beaten down, Dan, not defeated. Kutulusargon has changed his tactics, so we have to do the same. I'm afraid we aren't going to like the road we'll be traveling, though. We're going to have to be much more like our enemies to counter them. I want to stress this, we will become more like them in our

tactics and long-range strategies, but we won't ever be the same. This war has disintegrated down to the perpetration of atrocities on both sides. In this respect, we'll be fighting somewhat in the same manner as the Legions of Light. We'll be killing a lot of innocent people on the worlds he controls, but herein we have no real choice. Otherwise, we remain the same in that we know the difference between his system of rule and our desire for compassionate justice. We care that we're forced to murder human beings. He, on the other hand, doesn't give a damn. Only absolute rule over everything matters to him and his evil father, Samael. Even those Ubornot warriors know the difference. In fact, they're really compassionate although you have to understand their ways to see it."

"I'll take your word for it, Arden."

Arden left the communications section and climbed the ladder to the bridge deck and returned to his private rooms next to the captain's quarters. His living area was divided into three parts: a sealed sleeping chamber, small living room, and private study. The study had a built-in desk, book shelves, and an information console with crystal viewing and computer systems. The living room was a standard military arrangement containing several finely crafted sculpture pieces and two framed paintings for decoration.

The paintings were special, and Arden took them everywhere with him. One was a portrait of an elderly woman whom he'd known many centuries earlier at the Ansharim Council Central's Strategic Planning College. Her name was Morgil Collen-drex and she was both his close friend and instructor for many years. Even with advancing age, she was lovely as a young girl; a product of her youthful and pleasing personality. There was no question that Arden loved her dearly and liked to think about their happy times together. The second painting was of a sexy-looking girl whom he'd never met, but enjoyed looking at. Actually, Arden Ardel preferred the company of women and missed their charming ways, but he'd resigned himself to looking at his treasured painting in lieu of the real thing. This was one of the prices paid for being a part of the rim fleet where there were few women. He'd been out on patrol so long that even one of those overbearing and absurdly self-sufficient Nashramh women began to appeal to him. When he first realized this, it was obvious that he'd been out in the void too long.

After entering his study, Arden seated himself at his overloaded desk and set about working on one of his major tasks. There were at least 500 hours of study and review work ahead of him in the form of data crystals and plasti-nap documents. This ever growing volume of work arrived daily over special transceivers, in the Corbol's Communications section, and was transcribed for him on both the crystals and plasti-nap hardcopy. He had to go over each of these transmissions, received from local field operatives, before consulting with Danel and Council Central on their next moves. As time progressed and enemy activity increased exponentially over the centuries, this review process had grown to gigantic proportions, taking up a great deal of his and other Magums' time. Unlike the Nashramh's Council Central, which consisted of millions of disincarnate sisters and brothers along with their living Magums, the Ansharim's governing body was confined solely to incarnate Magums. Thus, everyone had to share in the tedious process of evaluating special documentation crystals, originating in their own operational zones, to contribute to the corporate decision making process.

"At least I can't say this stuff is boring," he mumbled as he inserted the first crystal into his personal translator.

The first report was from Brother Ander-Benard, a military attaché, serving aboard the Amornoach Confederation's fleet destroyer 'Lancer', which was involved in a recent action against a black raider in the TRX3066B Star Group. After listing a detailed account of pertinent statistics concerning the Amornoach XVIth and XIXth battle squadrons' dispositions, ship specifications, ordnance, and performance ratings, the agent gave a running account of the protracted search-and-destroy mission against the black raider.

"There are no doubts in our minds that we have to find the 'Borg-Craeder' which is raiding our commercial lanes and disrupting our civilian shipping. According to our most recent naval intelligence reports, 25 Class III passenger vessels and 51 Class I cargo carriers have been captured, and 96 Class I and II cargo carriers destroyed by the enemy raider during the past nine months. Sixty-two naval patrol vessels ranging from long-range scoutships to light cruisers were destroyed, while a single scoutship, the 'Web', escaped to identify the enemy warship. The Web encountered the Borg-Craeder by the outer moon of Hanskol-

Trek and identified him by his silhouette profile. The Web maintained radio silence and left the area without being detected, probably because of her size and the magnetic field generated by Hanskol-Trek's polar shield."

Ander-Benard went on to detail all the visible characteristics of the Borg-Craeder, reported by the Web's CIC section's optical and electronic observation recorders.

"Many of our people's relatives and friends have been killed or captured by the raider, and we know their fates are too terrible to contemplate. We have to destroy the Borg-Craeder at all costs, or we'll be reduced to nothing in a year's time. Our XIXth battle squadron which consists of 21 fleet destroyers, one light cruiser, and 16 scoutships, will approach the enemy raider from 20 degrees below the elliptic of Hanskol-Trek's orbit from the sunward side in its line of travel. The XVIth battle squadron will approach the enemy from six degrees above the elliptic from the sunward side astern of Hanskol-Trek's line of travel. We plan to engage the black raider with long-range torpedoes of Amornoach design and manufacture. These torpedoes are 500 meters-long and self-propelled. They contain multiple warheads and a sophisticated array of targeting and countermeasure equipment that doesn't appear on normal G.C.C. naval ordnance lists. I have no accurate information or data on their performance characteristics or destructive power."

The account went on to describe the battle squadron's initial approach towards the Borg-Craeder, their dispersal of fighters to broaden their squadron's attack posture, the launching of 82 long-range torpedoes, and the subsequent engagement with 500 expendo-fighters dispatched from the Borg-Craeder.

Ardel studied the course of the short battle, which hardly deviated from hundreds of others he'd reviewed during the past five years. The only thing new in the enemy's tactics was the use of single battle cruisers supported by large numbers of their three kilometer-long expendo-fighters. The enemy vessels were expertly manned and pressed the attack without letup, until the G.C.C. battle squadrons were overwhelmed and destroyed. Otherwise, this action was no different in its general mechanics. The Lancer, along with both battle squadrons' warships, was destroyed and their crews wiped out before they came close to the Borg-Craeder. Of the 82 long-range torpedoes fired from the XIXth squadron, only five

managed to penetrate the battle cruiser's shields and impact against his hull, causing light to moderate, surface damage. None of the XVIth battle squadron's torpedoes succeeded.

Ander-Benard's combat analysis crystal was retrieved by an Ansharim Necro-Classic recovery vessel operating in the area shortly after the conflict. The Borg-Craeder had moved to a better location closer to the sun and the industrial planets orbiting it, leaving the wrecked and lifeless Amornoach battle squadrons floating out in the void; there were no survivors.

Another crystal, recorded by Haeloet-Benard, revealed the inner workings of political corrupters on a highly industrialized world, known as Kamox-Zen. Wherein the activities of prominent politicians and military leaders was closely regulated and kept open to public view, Jerden directed agents, of Sargon's XXXVth Light-probe Legion, infiltrated the standing public bureaucracies and legal system, and plied their trade there. In a society where powerful men and women were kept in check by law and their dealings aired publicly, bureaucrats and lawyers had access to the tools of actual government. They exercised unlimited opportunities to manipulate minor actions that placed them in absolute control of the planet's entire military and political network. Their primary means of control wasn't based in what they initiated in the public interest, but the means they used to curtail and prevent things from happening. They slowed down and stopped whatever was really beneficial to the people's interest by ingenious delaying maneuvers and red tape centered on complying with the letter of the law. Lawyers and bureaucrats using both time and litigation as their major weapons were able to deliver Kamox-Zen into Sargon's hands in less than 500 years.

There were accounts of numerous planet-side political and military operations among the intelligence crystals, and these too spelled out a general pattern of unchecked enemy successes. It was obvious that the Legions of Light trained and employed greater numbers of local agents, using every mode of bait and reward imaginable to secure their allegiance. Wherever a target organization's officials attempted to maintain control by means of open truth and fair exchanges, the enemy created clandestine counter organizations which operated in secret to spread disruptive misinformation in the guise of truth. On the other hand, when the defending forces relied on secrecy and a need-to-know

system of information handling, the enemy skillfully manipulated the dissemination of open truth to counter them. They never missed a trick and their intended victims became their best allies. On planetary fields of battle, and out in the void, they were intelligent and resourceful planners, bold in maneuvers, and decisive in their attacks. There was no discounting their ability to succeed in any environment where time and long-term planning worked to their benefit.

Arden knew his own small operational zone was no different from all the thousands of others along the rim, and that the 26,000,000 Benards, stationed on more than a million worlds, were experiencing the same frustrating and tragic situations. It was hard to keep in mind that the invasion had just begun as far as Sargon's Legions of Light were concerned. They appeared unbeatable, at least as viewed under the present circumstances. There had to be other means of checking their intrusion into the Starset Galaxy and to defeat them in the field. Yes, the situation would have to be approached from another perspective and a different strategy employed against these hordes of alien invaders.

Chapter 13

Sargon

Did you ever wonder what happened to Meseosargon after we captured him back in NASHIM 8304-7N5? Well, that's been a well-guarded secret for a long time, but now. . . .

03:49-22 SHABIN 1610-8N5

"The war is lost! It's only a matter of time until the Legions of Light and their black allies occupy the sixth, seventh and first arm rim worlds and begin their steady move toward our galaxy's center."

Rinim's announcement to the assembly of Nashramh planners came as no surprise, but was now making official what everyone knew to be true. Miriam and Eaun were only two of a thousand Magums in the huge auditorium. The other 36,000 people were planners from Three-Stones Academy's major sections, and all were charged with responsibility for making the academy's planned move.

"I will not dwell on the statistics of our losses or those of the G.C.C. Combined Navies," Rinim continued to speak in her oddly affected voice. "But, I will begin this session with a few pertinent details that we of Council Central feel you must know to understand the true gravity of our situation."

The auditorium was so silent that only Rinim's voice and the muffled whirr of air-conditioning fans could be heard. The entire audience sat with rapt attention, listening to every word she said, almost as if they would be the last.

"We've known for more than 300,000 years that we were vastly inferior to Samael's Black Legions, but only recently we've discovered just how inferior we really are. As many of you already know, we captured a young Belial, by the name of Meseosargon, back in 8304-7N5, and that we had him under study in a number of secret facilities. What none of you know is that he escaped from us."

Miriam looked over at Eaun and their eyes met, both sharing a mutual sense of shock!

"The fact that this Belial escaped from us isn't an issue here, nor has it anything to do with our decision to remove Three-Stones Academy and Council Central from this world. In fact, we knew the Belial would escape from us from the very moment we captured him. This is the real issue with respect to Sargon; we don't know yet what these Belials are, but we have some educated guesses. I am now going to speak on this subject uninterrupted for some time, so please understand that this is a key factor concerning this disclosure and all of our subsequent decisions."

Rinim stopped for a moment and drank from a glass of water on the rostrum before her, then continued.

"You will remember that we destroyed Borgdragon Estate back in 6707-5N6, and thought we killed Gensargon with the explosion. This, we found, was not so. We only blew his clothes off: that is, his body. The loss of his corporeal form was only a minor inconvenience to him, if any at all. Gensargon immediately propelled himself to his closest intact battle cruiser and became part of its central computer system. He then ordered the vessel to return to his father's domain and for the remaining warships to attack any G.C.C. vessel in the immediate area. We believe this was a diversionary action, and Gensargon wanted us to think we'd killed him. From what little we were able to gather from Meseosargon, he, Gensargon that is, actually appreciated our mining of his citadel. He found it interesting to ponder upon during his return home. When the G.C.C. managed to destroy Josargon's ship during the Great Conflagration, he too merely propelled himself to another uninjured battleship and took over its central computer system. It was Josargon who ordered his black fleet to turn and return to their home base. All injured vessels were ordered to self-destruct so we couldn't capture and study any of their stragglers.

"Now of greater significance is this: the young Meseosargon is a reincarnation of Josargon. Yes, this is a fact, and Samael merely assigned him a new name as a matter of policy. The present invader, Kutulusargon, is a reincarnation of Gensargon . . . and this is no myth . . . we know it to be true. There is no means known to kill, destroy or seriously disable these fantastic creatures. I refer to them as creatures because they are in no way human. Not in any sense of the word. They are corporate beings with, we suspect, more than 1,000 individual personalities of an alien nature. We suspect they are small fragments of Samael himself, and therefore not subject to any of the rules he imposes on all other life forms."

Miriam hadn't noticed it, but she and all of the others in the auditorium were sitting stone still, with their jaws clenched, and barely breathing, lest they miss a single word Rinim had to say.

"When we captured Meseosargon, who was still in a child's body, he fought with superhuman strength, but was subdued by a team of Pathfinders. He was rendered unconscious, that is, physically unconscious by injections of Claxo-Kam 10 until he was delivered to one of our R.A.D. Stations. From that point on, he was processed in a means which remains top-secret to this day. We found through studying the data secured from him, by various ingenious means, that he was totally aware of all that transpired around him aboard the SD Yanna Jun-Lal and in our various facilities, no matter how he was sedated. The creature is multi-dimensional and active in both ethereal and temporal environments, and, we suspect in the Beriatric dimension too. He did appear to be bound to his temporal body, but then we aren't really sure of this."

"How in hell can that be?" Eaun whispered under her breath.

"I heard that Eaun," Rinim rumbled, "and I'm sure the rest of you are wondering how he can do that." Well, frankly, we don't know. But all indications lead us to believe he does. When we had him confined to a heliocentric force field of 28 mega-lines Argonel, he didn't notice it and remained both cold and aloof, although he was clearly studying us just as we were observing him. Unfortunately, we believe he learned as much about us as we did about him. Our experience with advanced Jerdens under the same circumstances, I might note, required only a heliocentric force of 6.2 mega-lines. We studied his physical body and learned that it is

vastly superior to any life form we've as yet encountered, and though quite simple in construction, we can't discover how to reproduce it. His body is unique in its regenerative powers and we estimate that it's in prime condition for more than a million years.

The only thing we could discover about him personally is that he has an immense sex drive and requires partners for his pleasure. In this, we were able to get to him by letting him see women all around without letting him touch any of them. I think he was genuinely bothered by this and this alone. Otherwise, his thinking process was coldly analytical and nothing got past him."

Rinim went on to describe the narrow range of conversations the interrogators had with Meseosargon before he escaped. She noted that in total, he wasn't impressed by their intellectual level, nor by their security precautions. When he was ready to leave, he did. A black battleship, accompanied by 1,000 battle cruisers, appeared above the remote station where Meseosargon was being held, and blew it out of existence with a fantastic display of fire-power. Meseosargon merely propelled himself up to the battleship's central computer as the fleet turned and left for his home galaxy. That's all there was to it. The scout destroyer, 'SD Tomot-Tae', arrived within visual range of the station when this action took place, and witnessed the destruction. Our Necro-Classic people recovered and accounted for all of our sisters' gamma-complexes from the station and obtained most of their information about the incident from them.

"Another area of major concern to us is the large number of infiltrators making their way into the G.C.C. combined governments and their armed services." Rinim turned to face the large view-screen to her right. "This data was compiled by our Necro-Classic Authorities who processed recovered gamma-complexes from our casualties and those of the G.C.C.'s combined fleets after the Great Conflagration. Six percent, yes, six percent of the gamma-B's recovered from 45,000,000,000 G.C.C. casualties were black infiltrators! From our own casualties, we found not a single infiltrator, nor any who'd ever been tampered with. We had 1,000 known agents make their way into our pre-novice program 10,000 years before the Great Conflagration, and we've caught many others in our various academies, but none ever made it into our fleet or other branches. At least none we know of."

"Nevertheless, we're faced with a debilitating fact. The enemy has a substantial foothold in our allies' governing and defensive structure, and that spells doom for our cause. We suspect both the numbers and percentages have increased a great deal during the last 3,000 years."

Rinim sipped some more water before starting again.

"Now we come to our most difficult problem. That is, the status of our most closely guarded secrets. We don't have many, if any, left! On the 16th day of Shabin, 1609-8N5, the scout destroyer, 'SD Meilo-Tae', surprised an enemy courier ship out on the seventh arm rim, and engaged it in battle. The enemy ship was wrecked and its entire crew killed, but their deadman mechanism failed to detonate. Sappers from the Meilo-Tae boarded the craft and gutted it of all its security and navigational crystals before destroying the hulk. In the process, they discovered a special pouch containing 3,000 top-secret data crystals destined for His Holiness, Pon Bonacto Broum, Kutulusargon's Chief Priest at Morfoe-am XII. Those crystals, which were only copies of the originals, by five stages, listed volumes of accurate and up-to-date information on many of our most secret operations and plans.

"It is clear that most, if not all, of this information was developed by the enemy, himself, from observations, extensive records keeping, infiltration into our less classified libraries, and an in-depth analysis of our various operations for the past 300,000 years. Enemy intelligence services are the masters of information gathering, processing, retrieval and analysis. They leave no stone unturned in their search for facts, and their estimates and conclusions are so close as to seem like our own original material. They are thoroughly acquainted with how our Sisters-Magum work, the performance characteristics of our vessels, and the information we've taken from their ship. They know the details concerning our joint operations with the Ansharim Brotherhood in the seventh arm's seeding project, and much more. In fact, they're well-informed on most of our commercial and military operations."

Rinim went on to outline each category of information contained in the captured crystals, and noted how much of it was developed. The enemy also presumed that both the Nashramh and Ansharim would disperse their organizations under a different structure and move their Councils Central once they realized the war was lost. They even guessed how the operations were to be

conducted and developed countermeasure plans to prevent the dispersion. Since this information came to light, Council Central has reformed its contingency plans and was sharing them with no one. Everything will be done without prior notice and all plans were subject to last second changes. There is no other workable answer to the enemy's calculations, and surprise of action is the only means left.

"Both our own navy and those of the G.C.C. have never recovered from the massive losses incurred during the Great Conflagration, and even though we've developed weapons systems commensurate to the enemy's, we can't match either their numbers or firepower. Our allies are building warships as fast as they can, although they are now much smaller than those built before the Conflagration because of a serious premium on the physical resources, time required for construction, and experienced combat crews for larger ships. We estimate we can conduct a back-area holding program against enemy advances providing we abandon much of the outer rim to him."

Miriam hadn't realized just how serious the situation was, although she knew they were taking a drubbing in every action made against the enemy. Now Rinim was making it official.

"With respect to our own and the G.C.C.'s fleet actions against enemy marauders, we've been consistently outgunned and outfought in every engagement with them. Our highly maneuverable scout destroyers have been most successful in their attacks on the enemy's warships, although they only effect structural damage. We're like tiny insects attacking giant armored reptiles. Our weapons systems are good and can inflict serious damage to the black raiders, but are far too small to destroy the giant vessels. Our scout freighters are less successful and sustain greater losses because of their size. A 600 or 700 meter-long scout destroyer hardly registers on the enemy's mass-displacement sensors, whereas a 5 to 15 kilometer-long scout freighter can't hide from them for very long, even with our advanced cloaking systems.

"By the way, we've retrieved all fighter-lifeboats ever equipped with the Robel III advanced drives and replaced them with conventional TGX-3 units. All of our warships are propelled by advanced Robel III sub-binary drives equipped with a special self-destruct device built into them. These devices bypass the ship's deadman mechanisms and ensure that the units cannot be

captured by the enemy. He knows our performance factors, but he doesn't as yet know how we achieve them. He may figure it out in time, but we aren't giving him any hints. Our scientists, designers, and engineers who developed the drives, all reside with Ruby in Council Central now, and therefore can't be captured and forced to reveal their secrets. Where and how the drive units themselves are built, still remains a secret."

"At least that's a good note," Eaun nudged Miriam's arm, then continued to focus her attention on Rinim.

"The G.C.C.'s special projects units have been probing the outer rim zones with the idea of establishing emergency supply centers to support both their gold acquisition ventures and raiding groups. The huge volume of gold required to build sub-binary drives and sub-spec operating systems is a matter of critical importance to the G.C.C. navies. The loss of more than 10,000,000 vessels, and their immense volumes of gold, has nearly bankrupted available stores of the precious metal so critical for sub-binary drives. They know such bases can't be held for long, but are gambling that large amounts of gold can be brought out of the rimworlds before the enemy occupies them.

"We know some G.C.C. probing operations have made contact with local populations on an experimental basis, and this includes some of our colonists, whom they've used as specimens for tracking current events on specific planets. It seems that these mining venture groups have been penetrating the seventh arm rim for more than 20,000 years, and have used primitive natives in their search for gold. This explains the focus of highly developed mining and metallurgy on many of the primitive worlds which we and the Ansharim seeded, especially when the native populations have no concept of its industrial use. In all events, we've done nothing to discourage these G.C.C. ventures since we're removing all of our colonists, and replacing them with special watchers."

Rinim stopped again and drank some more water. Her long discourse didn't seem to bother her vocal chords, and only caused her to become thirsty.

"Now we come to our joint seeding venture, with the Ansharim, out on the seventh arm rim. We will continue with our scheduled retrieval of both our present watchers and colonists according to plan, although time factors may be altered in each individual case. The enemy has infiltrated, and in many cases corrupted our

colonists on the seventh arm rim worlds, although they haven't been able to penetrate our watchers and oversight groups. Either way, they're in firm command of the field on every planet on which we've planted seeding operations, and we must be extremely careful with those colonists whom we recover. Our Necro-Classic Authorities have kept a pretty good track of their activities until recently, when the enemy redoubled his efforts at corrupting the masses. These corrupting factors have spilled over into large segments of the colonists, who are concentrically shrouded, and they must face special handling and reconditioning procedures before they can be of any use to us in the future."

Rinim paused for a moment, and then concluded. "Before we adjourn this session, I'd like to mention that we expect to hold out against the enemy's increasing pressure for about another 10,000 years before the G.C.C. is broken and beaten. When that happens, if it does, there will be only ourselves and the Ansharim to give him any kind of organized resistance. The enemy knew about our gamma-matrix recovery program long before the Great Conflagration, but discounted it as being too little and too late. He appears to have changed his attitude, of late, and we'll have to change our techniques accordingly. There will be far more casualties in the future than were suffered in the past, for we shall have geometrically more gamma-complexes of both civilian and military personnel to recover. The Conflagration is by no means over, for it has just begun, and we will not be truly beaten unless and until we say we are. And I assure you of this, we will never be truly beaten, no, never!"

Chapter 14

Reunion

There's a price to everything we do, even if we aren't aware of it . . . although all prices aren't negative, we are certainly more aware of them. Therefore, it's good to have a chance to renew old acquaintances and have a chance to right supposed wrongs. . . .

20:00-09 DEMIN 1611-8N5

This was the day of days Arden had waited for since he last met Miriam on the Klikah-Lal back in JERIN 6136-7N5. That was a brief meeting which hadn't been planned and Danel, from Council Central, told him to keep his identity secret. At the time it was difficult to keep quiet, but he reluctantly complied with Danel's wishes. It was only when he was leaving the Klikah-Lal that he broke his silence, giving her a hint about his identity. He remembered winking at her from his litter and saying, "Miriam! I don't really eat little elves, you know." Yes, he used the same line when he met her long before when they were friends on the G.C.C. Starliner Supreme Greenstar. He loved her from the very beginning and still did.

Thinking back, Arden remembered their first meeting so long ago . . . yes, it was raining then, back in 0560-4N4. He was working his way along a muddy path in the middle of a rainstorm, up to that little shelter she was waiting in. He could see her now, in his mind's eye, drenched to the skin, her long black hair hanging in wet strings. When they first met, Miriam was a skinny little thing with a pistol pointed at him. How did it go? He tried to remember the events as they happened.

"You're Miriam, I presume," he chided her. "And I'm Arden Ardel. Do you plan to shoot me with that pistol, or shall we talk? Come on now, Miriam, either shoot now or talk. I'm not really a bad fellow, other than being a rapist and a hatchet killer."

She hesitated, then lowered her pistol and looked at him for a long moment.

"Okay, let's talk then. . . ."

Time hadn't really changed anything, even though she was now a Magum and had 10 new dimensions to her personality; she was still Miriam, the woman he loved so dearly before Borgdragon Estate was built . . . back in that pouring rainstorm. They worked together after that, and although he fell in love with her time and again, everything always went sour. He wasn't going to let it happen again, no, not this time.

Now they were to meet formally to open new channels between their organizations, only this time it wouldn't be like the disaster in 5870-5N4. A lot had happened since then, and both he and his enigmatic counterpart, in the elder Miriam, had grown since then. At least this was Danel's opinion, and his mother's. According to Danel, Arden would learn about why things happened as they had, and how his perceptions at the time were completely wrong.

"You will tell her what really happened, Arden," Danel's voice sounded in his inner mind, "because when you're in her presence again, everything will become clear as if it just happened."

Arden was already beginning to remember those ancient days, more clearly each time now, almost as if they were only yesterday. But then, this wasn't the only reason for the meeting with Miriam. There was something else to be said, and he had a good idea of what it was.

The 'SD Obel-Zee' edged alongside the TU9310 Corbol. The two scout destroyers joined grappling gear and pulled together. The outer airlocks were sealed, then opened and pressurized.

"Welcome aboard the Corbol, Sister Miriam," Arden spoke formally, extending his left hand. "It's been a long time and I'm happy to see you again."

"Thank you, Brother Arden. I've been looking forward to seeing you again. Peace be with you." The voice was familiar, but most striking was the ancient Nashramh accent with its harsh suffix endings to the feminine words.

Arden recognized the ancient dialect spoken by his long lost companion, whom he could never forget. She'd come to the surface while the elf-child, the new Miriam, and her other parts, stepped back from view and left them alone to speak in privacy. Arden's own Magum personalities also receded back into his innermost mind and remained passive until he asked them to resurface; in this, he truly appreciated their compassion and respect for him. It was time to heal old wounds and prepare for the future.

After the formal greeting, Miriam's eyes were checked by the Ansharim's security officer, then she entered the ship. The two walked to the captain's conference room and closed the door behind them.

"Well, Miriam, that sure beats a military band and all the foolish hoopla, doesn't it?"

"True," she smiled broadly. "Now let's sit down and get to know one another again . . . it's been a long time for all of us. We can talk about business later."

Arden pulled out a chair for her and bowed as she sat down. "Allow me to be a gentleman, at least while we're on this ship," he grinned.

"I'm not offended in the least, Arden, or Ben Condon, or whichever one of you chooses to be a gentleman."

"We all choose to be, Miriam."

Leaning back in her chair, Miriam studied the hard-looking man sitting across the table from her. He had dark, nearly black skin and a thin stark-appearing mouth. His eyes, though, were as soft and calm as hers. He too, was different from other Magums, but just how she couldn't say. She tried to remember him as he appeared when she first met him back in 0560-4N4 and the other times they'd worked together. God, that was so long ago and she was still ashamed of her inability to meet him halfway. She had to set things straight with him before anything else was discussed.

"I want to begin by apologizing to you personally, Arden. What I did to you during our early years was wrong and I am truly sorry for it."

"You don't owe me any kind of apology, Miriam. There isn't anything to be forgiven," Arden spoke softly. "We all wear our humanity differently, and we have to learn about ourselves before we can deal with others. Since I came together with my first love, Gale, I've learned a lot about you and your sisters I never

understood before. I, too, was a part of our problem since I loved you in a way that was stifling. Loving a faery in a human body brings out those feelings in me even now, although I didn't know what was motivating me then. And," he continued, raising his hand to ward off her response, "I still love you dearly . . . far more than you can believe."

Miriam's eyes were misty. "I still love you . . . and yes, far more dearly than I can express in words, Arden. It's taken a long time for me to understand what human love really is, since we faeries haven't any experience with such feelings . . . it scared me out of my wits."

Arden nodded, realizing they'd both made mistakes maturing in the same manner as other human beings.

"Our last meeting, back in Four-N-Five, was a disaster for more than one reason, Arden," she continued. "It's true that I remembered who you were, but I was too stubborn to back down. I didn't know it then, but my superiors were a party to the failure, since they knowingly supplied me with documents that wouldn't pass the test. We were only symptoms of the problems facing our sacred orders, and we both became victims of a broad range of unhealthy circumstances. It was our experience at Borgdragon Estate that taught my sisterhood much about ourselves and caused us to reconsider our ways. And, then, we still have a long way to go before we solve all our problems, but we're going in the right direction now."

"Yes," Arden nodded, "Borgdragon was the turning point for us all."

"It wasn't easy for me, though," Miriam spoke softly. "I wasn't allowed to wallow in self-pity, but was impressed into service shortly after our core-stone was completed. You see, there were only a hundred Nashramh officers among all our sisters who died in that black hell, and six Ansharim officers. I was awakened by our Necro-Classic Officer, Morgannah Noch, and assigned to work together with Sister-Commander Froe Logoet and Sister-Lieutenant Sahlie Lor over-seeing the enemy's torture chambers. We isolated and retrieved our sisters who were prey to them. In fact, it was Sahlie Lor, the woman accused of treason, who engineered my entry into the elf-child's body and it was at her insistence that I was allowed to sleep in the Magum-matrix until I was ready to emerge into temporal time and space. Little did anyone know that

it would be you who would cause me to awaken back on the Klikah. Since then, I've learned a lot about myself and both of our sacred orders."

Ardel agreed. "With this, Miriam, I'll tell you something about myself that I've never discussed with another living being, not even Danel, although he knows all the facts. I was, and am different from all other living human beings in that I was, like yourself, never a gamma-A. You were a winged faery and something different from any known gamma-complex. But you had a vast amount of experience with others of your own race while I had none before being born into human form. I was an aerial spirit on an unpopulated planet, a world devoid of all life other than vegetation. I had no others of my kind to learn with. It was only when a woman, heavy with child, was stranded on that distant world, that I encountered another being. I entered the infant at birth and became what I am, the only son of Marah, the Custodian of the Sacred Stone, who became Ruby of your Council Central. Until I had binary souls added to my own, I wasn't truly human and really couldn't function as such. Now you can see why we suffered from our differences while being in love with one another."

"Yes, I sensed something familiar about Ruby while we were in Borgdragon's wall," Miriam smiled. "There was something about the way she spoke to me, almost as if . . . yes, as if she knew something special and held me to be dear. You know, it was Ruby who armed me with those damned documents back in Four-N-Five. She told me so, before I volunteered to enter the Borgdragon project."

Arden smiled broadly. "My mother once told me about something that happened long before I was born . . . just before they discovered your home world of Meszhiah. There was an elf woman named Sophieah and a little winged faery who'd been kidnapped by pirates. Sophieah was pregnant and had a baby aboard a commercial carrier somewhere out in the void. The baby was born without a soul. To make a long story short, the faery, whose name was 'Iyami, merged with the infant's nephish and became human. The child was named after my mother and 'Iyami. That is, Marah and 'Iyami . . . Maryam or Miriam. Now isn't that interesting?"

"I understand," Miriam nodded, "it all makes sense now, and that's why Ruby gave you the faery flowers . . . to make up for my loss."

"Exactly, to teach me about your kind so we can come together in time . . . when I don't know, but in time."

"This brings to mind a riddle that my sisterhood has wrestled with for thousands of years. We call it the Riddle of the Red Thread."

"And we call it the Riddle of the Blue Thread," Arden laughed.

The two spoke privately for several hours and came to an understanding which healed the wounds they'd carried with them for so long. Recounting long dead events added a new dimension to the present-day conflict, and some harsh realities came to light. Both understood things were different, and their organizations were being forced to change tactics to fit the enemy's challenge.

"It's tough to admit," Arden nodded, "that we're being manipulated by the enemy as if we're actually a part of his invading legions."

"That's true," Miriam agreed. "To resist him, we become more like him every day. How can we strive to be compassionate and just, when we're engaged in a protracted conflict? We're forced to respond to his tactics, in kind. If we don't, we lose."

"Well, if there's a way, we'll find it, Miriam. I'm told the war is just beginning, and the past half million years were only a period of skirmishes."

Miriam looked at him for a long time, then, nodded. "I'm afraid you're right. It's only beginning and we're losing. We aren't finished yet, and it won't be over until we're all dead or we give up. We won't ever give up."

* * *

There are those who are accused of treason and prove to be totally dedicated and loyal . . . and there are others who leave us in a bind. . . .

04:30-14 DEMIN 1611-8N5

The view was surrealistic. A shimmering stream of pure ammonia cascaded down a 2,500 meter cliff through billowing clouds of methane, into a sea of molten metal. Everything reflected

the glowing sea since no light penetrated the 200 kilometer-deep Krosmahen atmosphere. The surface gravity was 15.8 Argonel and the mean temperature registered at 900 degrees Argonel. Nothing here conformed to the rules of nature elsewhere, since temperature zones ranging from -50 degrees to +3,800 degrees Argonel existed within two kilometers of each other. This phenomenon was common and everything on the planet's turbulent surface either boiled or froze.

Some primitive humans would consider this a picture of hell, but it wasn't. There were natural sentient life forms in this seemingly uninhabitable atmosphere. Rinim could hear their shrill songs in her inner mind, and was slowly learning to decipher their complex language. Although she couldn't see them, their presence added to the violent beauty of the scene outside.

Rooms! It seemed as if her entire life was spent in rooms of one kind or other. Whether aboard a scout destroyer, or in a giant auditorium, Rinim always found herself confined by four walls a floor and a ceiling. The pressure of business robbed her of those experiences in nature so endearing to her friends and associates. This was as close to nature as she'd ever get, looking out a fortified window at a place where she could never set foot.

This room was part of an advanced planetary survey facility. The entire ceramic structure was set in a floating stasis-field which countered immense gravitation, extreme temperatures, and atmospheric pressures. Submerging to the surface in the Nashramh's ceramic transit vessel took three days and a lot of maneuvering. Rinim was surprised they'd made it down intact, since the battering forces from outside were so violent. It felt like bomb blasts. She certainly didn't look forward to the trip back up to her next ship.

Turning to face her associate who just entered, Rinim motioned to the couch and sat down.

"Please sit next to me so we can relax and speak together as friends."

"Thank you, My Grace, I'm honored."

"Come now, my friends call me Rinim and I don't like being pretentious. I might be from Council Central, but I'm not very awesome. Now let's talk about you, my dear sister."

Niferah was the most beautiful Tzian woman Rinim had ever seen. She resembled a young girl, rather than a 400 year-old

woman. Her elongated head was shaved clean and only thin eyebrows remained on her delicately featured face. Niferah's satin-like skin was deep brown without a sign of a single wrinkle. Even her voice was clear and mellow to hear. She was perfect in every way, reminding Rinim of a beautifully sculptured bust of a royal princess from one of the rimworlds where Tzian women had been stationed long ago.

Niferah had taught fledgling 'Men and Women of the Mission' on O.T. Station III for 9,000 years and remembered all their names. This too amazed Rinim, since thousands of men and women graduated from the O.T. Station and passed on to a wide range of assignments along the seventh arm rim.

Rinim sipped her tea and listened to Niferah's account of one of her instructors, Kruminah B'Tziah.

"I can't really say I disliked Kruminah, Rinim, but she was always outspoken and inclined toward negative interpretations of events. Unfortunately she seemed to be closer to the truth than we cared to admit. Maybe that's why we were uncomfortable with her."

"Weren't you aware of her past record?" Rinim asked, sipping her tea. "Surely you knew about her history before Borgdragon Estate was built. Her experiences with our system of justice weren't exactly positive."

"No, I didn't learn about that until recently. We don't have access to rim fleet personnel records since so few of their people are ever assigned to us. She was just a tough and negative lieutenant as far as I was concerned. I know differently now."

"Well then, tell me about the incident with the Meszian elves," Rinim spoke softly, "the ones who are assigned to the inner rimworld called Odomah-Tek."

Niferah thought for a few moments, then smiled, "Oh yes, those funny little elves."

"They are funny little creatures," Rinim agreed, "but they have a great deal of promise, providing they have time to grow up."

"I know. The group we're talking about was made up of a mixture of high and middle elves. None of them had ever been off Meszhia before, and they stuck together like nervous little children following their mother around. As far as they were concerned, I was their mother and everything I said was absolute truth. Then Kruminah came along and told them something else."

"Did they listen to her?"

"No. They just stood together, dressed in their little grey uniforms, and acted like they were listening. I could tell they were all nervous and wanted to leave. They had a little habit of tugging at their coat hem with their right hand when they were upset. Can you imagine 50 little elves tugging at their coat hems at the same time? I could hardly keep from laughing out loud. None could see me, but I was watching the entire affair from my office door."

"I can imagine."

"Biltak, a High Elf, told her they already knew all that there was to know about their assignment. After all, their teacher, Niferah, told them everything there was to know. Kruminah might as well have been talking to a blank wall. Those poor little elves didn't hear a word she said. If they had, maybe their performance in the field would have been better, but I'm only guessing."

"Did Kruminah say anything out of the ordinary to them?"

"No. The problem with her presentation was tact and honesty. She was bluntly honest and the elves couldn't face that. Even after nearly 6,000 years in the field, most of them can't face the blunt truth. Elves tend to get caught up in fantasies and become victims of glitter and false charm. They confuse daydreams with conscience and walk away from their sworn duties. I think that nine out of ten will sit on the fence and try to balance one side against the other. Therein lies their road to failure."

"Failure, yes," Rinim nodded. "I see it as a tragedy for both them and us."

"Why do you want to know about Sister Kruminah, Rinim? Is she working with elves again?"

"Not at the moment, Niferah, but I'm afraid she will, shortly. What else can you tell me about her?"

"Other than being a bit negative in her thinking, I suspect she has a low regard for our field operations. But then, all naval personnel assigned to us have that same attitude. I think she really liked those elves and wanted to arm them to face reality. She was, shall we say, bright in many ways . . . quite intellectual, but not a good leader. I couldn't imagine her being anything more than a sub-lieutenant, much less a full lieutenant. She lacked something."

"What would that be?"

"I don't know. She definitely understood how things worked, but there was something missing. Maybe that's why she always

appeared to be negative even when she was accurate in her analysis of a situation. Maybe it was a personality defect, but I'm not clear on that point. I'm sorry; Rinim, but I can't offer anything more."

"There's much more to the story, Niferah, but it's too long and involved to deal with now. We make mistakes we aren't proud of, but we still have to deal with them."

"I take it Kruminah is one of those mistakes," Niferah asked, wondering where this was leading. "Is there something I should know about?"

"No, nothing that concerns you or anything you've ever done. This is a matter of greater proportions and affects all of us in one way or other. Kruminah, herself, isn't important. She's a symptom of something else that concerns us, which we must resolve as soon as possible. On the surface the problem appears to be simple, but it is far from that."

"You sound as if the weight of eternity is on your shoulders, Rinim. I wish I could help."

"We're all stuck in the same boat, Niferah. Our universe, the Ethereal-Temporal Complex, is in constant motion and we're drawn along by a massive current of events we can only sense, but never truly understand . . . we call it fate. We only see small eddy currents and shifting tides, but never the broad flow of this eternal current. Samael's invading Legions of Light are only an unseen symptom of something greater. Remember, Niferah, microscopic things are merely reflections of macroscopic things, dimmer, but still much the same. That's why some people mistakenly conclude that spiritual and temporal things are different. They aren't."

"I'm afraid the clergy and spiritual leaders of a million worlds will disagree with you, Rinim. Much of their knowledge and fundamental values are predicated on there being a distinct difference between the two."

"True. There are many who try to divorce themselves from temporal reality and profess to be spiritual . . . but to no avail. Both spiritual and temporal matters are in the same arena . . . *Everything That Is*, is here and now. None of us can escape it. Prayer is nothing more than self-deception, since none of us can either entreat or bribe our Creator to be anything other than what it is - *Reality*. We alone are in this arena of violence and terror, and

none can save us other than ourselves. The voice within the voice spoke to us and we can still hear the words if we try."

"Isn't that spiritual, Rinim?"

"No. We don't hear it in the ethereal; we hear it in temporal events. Once we've entered into this veil of tears, our corporeal bodies, we cannot escape, ever. We are the temporal universe. Our individual actions and those which we perform in concert with one another determine our destiny. You see, within the overwhelming current of events, fate; we have some control over parts of it. How much is determined by our own actions and ability to recognize the course we must follow. We are one and the same with the mind of our Creator and not subject to the dictates of any egocentric factions of that mind. We all know what is right in the fabric of our very being. Therein lies our conscience. It is our conscience, not our spirit alone that makes us human."

"How then does our Necro-Classic Organization operate? They aren't corporeal."

"But they are . . . in a fashion."

"I don't understand."

"Our gamma-complex, once we enter into temporal reality as humans, is never again purely ethereal. We become a mixture of our corporeal nephish and our ethereal gamma-B structure, or as some call it, our soul. While disincarnate, we're limited in operating within the confines of temporal reality, but not entirely excluded. Remember, our human nephish is corporeal in all respects. It alone is our physical tie with temporal things."

"I know you're right, Rinim, but I've never affected temporal things between life-cycles. This holds true for most of us who're outside the Necro-Classic Organization."

"Not really, Niferah. But, let's discuss our tactical problems now. I want to learn more about your graduates from O.T. Station III. Now about those little elves we were discussing earlier . . ."

"Yes, our little elves. I've always worried about those innocent little people," Niferah spoke thoughtfully. "They have so little common sense when it comes to understanding hard realities. They always want someone else to do their thinking for them, providing the answers agree with what they already want. Their innocence can be a real curse and subject them to every kind of evil influence. Elves have a good sense of values and a deep-seated conscience, providing they aren't confused by their day-dreams

and fantasies. My experience with them whether in their natural bodies or in rimworld fits, is that they have a stubborn streak when anything gets in the way of their fantasies. They're always prone to making the wrong decision, then following it to the bitter end. No elf ever likes to admit they're wrong. It just isn't their nature."

"I'm afraid, Niferah, you're absolutely right in this respect. We've had little success with elves out on the rim, and regret having sent them. A few have a great deal of loyalty and resiliency, but are a minority. The others have either gone sour, or walked away from their responsibilities as if they never existed. They have some blind faith we'll come and rescue them and all will be well."

"We are going to retrieve them, aren't we?"

"Of course, but we aren't going to be overly kind to them. Most of these creatures betray their trust and desert their posts when we need them most. This has happened on every planet we've stationed them. Now things are getting rough and we can't tolerate any more desertions, not without reprisals. We're running out of excuses for these people."

"I don't like the sound of what you're saying, Rinim."

"I don't either, Niferah. But the terrible realities of our situation are crashing down on our heads and we can only blame our own people for many of the problems. Desertion is a new phenomenon with us and we don't know how to deal with it. There are some of our people who've become traitors and sided with the enemy. We're facing a real dilemma. We desperately want to be compassionate and just, but the sheer magnitude of our defections is staggering. Something drastic has to be done; only we don't know what. We're looking into a number of avenues now, none of which is nice to think about."

"Whatever you want from me, Rinim, I'll do my best."

"You always have. We have a lot of thinking to do and not much time to do it. Now, about Kruminah . . ."

Chapter 15

Palestine

Our cultural seeding program on seventh arm rimworlds was flawed from the beginning, and after nearly 6,000 years the Odomah-Tek colony was a shambles . . . as were others. The primary flaw, I suspect, stems from our poor choice of colonists . . . that is, mixing of disparate off-world races with primitive soil-bound populations . . . because misplaced negative local values often infect the supposedly superior visitors.

16:30-22 MAREN 1615-8N5

Four men and two women sat quietly in the near darkness of the Palestinian afternoon, awaiting the messenger whom they had traveled thousands of miles to see. The sweltering heat outside was oppressive and wasn't much better in the concrete block room of Nathan's unlit apartment where the meeting was to take place. Jaffa, although built on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, was never the garden spot of Palestine. In this summer heat the nearby water didn't help, since there wasn't even a breeze. In fact, moisture added much to the stifling atmosphere shrouding the unkempt seaport, which until recently had been only a backwash of the Ottoman Empire.

The war of independence was over, and the new Israelites were planning to expand the town of Tel Aviv, to the north, into a modern commercial city. But now the place was just a tepid and dirty conglomeration of ancient stone buildings mixed with newer structures that were old before completion. Narrow streets, overcrowding, and inadequate sewers amplified the state of decay

existing in the city. Modern plumbing and electricity were at a premium and life among its citizens remained as it had for centuries, just bordering on the primitive.

"I understand that our messenger is blind," Rene' broke the dark silence with her overly nasal voice. "I wonder how he gets around without help, since I'm told no one ever accompanies him anywhere."

"What do you mean by 'he'?" Telly asked with a start. "I was under the impression the messenger was a woman from the Necro-Classic Recovery Organization."

"I understood this to be true also," Rene' responded, "but the person we're meeting this afternoon is clearly a man, whom it is said is blind."

Telly leaned back against the rough concrete block wall and considered the matter. The woman could be disguised as a blind man. This would be prudent in this part of the world, but then, it could be something else.

Shuffling footfalls could be heard mounting the stone steps leading to the second story apartment as the six occupants waited in silence. There was a pause outside, then the latch turned and the door swung inward.

The small wiry figure was no more than a shadow at first, but Telly could make out his pinched features and eyeless sockets. This, then, was their messenger from O.T. Station III.

"I'm known hereabouts as Nathan Levi," the old voice creaked out, "but two of you have known me in past times as Mirisca haTolohn. I welcome you to my humble apartment, and apologize for not being here when you arrived. But, then, all is well."

"My Reverend Sister," Rene' spoke out, her voice cracking with emotion, "I didn't recognize you."

The strangely pinched face formed into a soft smile, as the wiry figure walked over to the only remaining stool and sat down.

"Please let me tell you of my situation before proceeding on with our business. First, my original body was killed in an aerial attack on a back road in Poland at the beginning of the last war. This happened shortly after I arrived on this world, so I was forced to usurp another body with which to complete my mission. Since then I've been a rider with this child of misfortune, Nathan Levi, and have shared his body with him for these many years. Nathan understands who and what I am, and is my ally in all matters."

"What happened to your eyes, My Reverend Sister? Rene' whispered.

"Oh, they became infected after being injected with fluid that was supposed to turn my eyes blue. It was done by a Lok-Nu by the name of S.S. Doctor Mengele at Auschwitz. But that was a long time ago. My sight is ethereal. Since I'm not truly in control of Nathan's body, I see for him, and he controls his own nephish. We're separate individuals and benefit from one another without having formed a binary arrangement. We keep one another company and share our feelings and experiences, thus no unclean relationship has been foisted upon his birthright. We are truly friends."

Telly knew of all the various kinds of binary personalities, and how they operated, but this was a new twist. Here, two distinctly different personalities shared one body, as friends and allies, without establishing a normal binary arrangement.

"Would you have abandoned Nathan's body had he wanted you to?" Telly asked. "Or, has your friendship evolved because of your close proximity to one another for so long a time?"

Nathan laughed, "A good question Telakin B'Mesziah, a very good question. I must speak for myself, in this matter, since Mirisca and I are in the habit of doing so. Yes, she would have left had I not accepted her when she first entered my head. You see, I was in a coma from having been struck on the head by a cobblestone. At the time I was only 12 years old. It was with her help that I was healed from within, and also with her help that I overcame certain mental problems I was born with. My mother was in her late forties when she gave birth to me and I was considered to be a slow child, or in modern terms, to be retarded. Mirisca helped me as no other could and I've been blessed with her companionship for these many years. With her help I've learned about who and what I really am and am privileged to be an active part of our effort to save this stricken world. Does this answer your question, Telakin?"

"Yes it does," Telly nodded, "but the concept of a non-binary unit, although not entirely new to me, is still quite amazing to come across out here on the rim."

"There's much more to us than appears on the surface, but then, very little of reality has ever been visible or discernible to our limited physical senses."

Nathan described his long journey from the laboratory at Auschwitz, through war-torn Germany, and to Austria, the home of Sarah of Vienna at the war's end. The old woman died in a cattle car destined for the internment camp at Dachau. Her gardener, Herr Inquart, admitted Nathan to Sarah's library, which was gutted by the Gestapo after she boarded the train for Germany.

"Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, they're all carbon copies of Voumot-Tek IV's or versions at Crumot-Vo, Lonta-Nom, Boulton, and thousands of other death camps on as many worlds. We're only part of a larger picture and our piece resembles the others down to the last detail."

"Do you mean they use the Bora-Daron Cross on those other worlds?" Rene' gasped.

"Yes, the secret servants of the Vrill's Brothers Militant, the Death-Head Divisions, also the secret police, medical experiments, mass murder and all the trimmings. Each of these movements has been orchestrated on a thousand planets during this century. This little war between the so-called 'free nations' and the Nazis is only the beginning here. Believe me; the war isn't over by a long sight. No, we've only experienced the opening skirmishes. Its form and tactics will change so many people won't even know they're in a combat zone, but the casualties will rise geometrically and civilization will disappear before their eyes. But still, few people will ever recognize what's happening until its too late."

"Then we have to warn them, no matter what the cost."

"We've been trying to do that for a long time, but without success. We can't even reach most of our own colonists or special operatives, much less the local population."

"Do you mean our operatives have all been killed?"

"No. I mean that most of them have blended with the population and either can't or won't respond to our warnings. We're facing real problems, and I don't know if we have either the time or resources to save this world. We're in a lot of trouble."

"Is the picture really that black?" Rene' asked. "We've been fighting Sargon for thousands of years, and this is the first time I've heard any suggestion of a possible defeat. Aren't we being a bit negative?"

"You never know. Maybe they'll get tired and go home," Telly mumbled. "I'm afraid I'm getting cynical, but the situation on this world has been critical for a long time. I can see why the colonists

and others are being sucked in the Colmer's net. The enemy's values and ethics permeate every facet of society, and there's no escaping their influence. It'll take a lot more than we've been doing to change their strategic advantage."

"That's true, but my reason for being here has nothing to do with the strategic balance of power on this planet. The outcome of the war is predictable, but not the tactical considerations. My interest lies with the HaGar who must decide whether they're with us or not. My discussions with their leaders, hasn't made the slightest difference. I don't think they're capable of change."

"Does that mean they're being left behind?"

"I suspect so, but then, I can't be sure. I'm only a messenger and haven't anything to do with actual policy decisions. I can only hope they're being retrieved with the rest, even if they have to be put back into prisons. There are too many good people among them to subject the whole tribe to Sargon's hell."

"I hear, I hear," Telly whispered.

Nathan explained that the power Mirisca was able to exercise prevented people he encountered from realizing he was either blind or a Jew. The fact that his hair was blond, and his complexion fair, definitely helped. He made his way to Palestine after leaving Vienna and lived in Jaffa as an obscure merchant. He remained hidden until this month, when he visited several Arab leaders, one who was the Mufti of Jerusalem. Now his mission was almost over and his body near death.

"The Shofar has sounded twice, as the saying goes, and our colonists are being readied for their return to the red sand. I've spoken to the leaders of the Sacred Brotherhood about the choice facing them and their people. They must decide for themselves whether to become as one with us, or remain on this world as Samael's unholy creatures. I feel they're doomed . . . these brilliant and resourceful minds are locked in a web of hate and superstition that allows them no hope of escape. It's almost like talking to creatures who are so alien that my speech is nothing more than a breeze across the sands to them. I do fear for them, since those I've met out on the street, and in their homes, are otherwise a gentle and civilized lot. Only this deeply ingrained insanity and hatred against others, who exist outside their superstitious purview, condemns them to their terrible fate. They haven't heard the

soundings of the Shofar and only covet this piece of barren land as their true heritage, how sad."

"Yes," Rene' nodded, "sad for them and for the inhabitants of this ruined world. I can see the beginnings of subliminal corruption being foisted on them in every country. The next thing we can expect is a revolution in communications wherein music and narcotics can be drummed into their social structure and black made to appear as white. They experimented with that in America and Germany between the wars, and I can see it becoming the rule rather than the exception."

"It's already been accomplished," Telly interjected. "The groundwork's been laid in their religious institutions. It won't take much to shift the emphasis from camp meetings to cult activities. There's no shortage of literature on the subject, especially in the various entertainment industries and universities. All the enemy needs to do is increase his tempo, and then it's all over."

"I wish I could say you're wrong, Mr. Hartman," Rene' spoke sadly. "Everywhere I go; there are signs of intolerance for stable values, and a thrust towards the extreme. This capitalist and communist fiasco is a prime example. They're nothing more than a channeling of religious intolerance into the political arena. The anti-communist fervor in the United States is only a small symptom of this stage of development. The world economic system will be manipulated to a critical state, just as it was before the last world war. The Soviets and their allies will do their part to support the western manipulators until they have a fertile ground for a central world government. I don't think their next step will be another world war . . . at least not a conventional one. Rather than hashish eaters running around with daggers in their hands, their new fanatics will have machine guns and hand grenades."

"Yes, but there will be a process of social disruption, possibly some no-win wars, to soften up the population for these new tactics. Things are accelerating now, and people are being conditioned to accept adverse change as being normal. The stage has already been set and we aren't in any position to stop the next act."

Chapter 16

Plans

We always keep our promises, even if the recipient doesn't know what they are . . . for instance, the off-hand gesture made to Sister-Captain Neferah 'Tziah by Batdor Zell back in TALUM 1000-8N5. . . .

28:00-09 TALUM 1615-8N5

The Nashramh scout destroyer, SD 'Qualo-Tae, stood alongside the G.C.C. naval replenishment base orbiting Hoalan XXIII, awaiting two passengers from one of the outer R.A.D. Stations. Captain Neferah B'Tziah stood peering into the inner airlock's screen monitor as a G.C.C. transport pod approached her ship. She was in one of her usual foul moods and itching to get the show on the road. It always rankled her when Fleet Admiralty insisted on assigning unidentified personnel to her ship, especially when they came from G.C.C. naval facilities. She didn't trust any allied personnel, other than a few pathfinders, who were of a different cut. Now two people, listed only as Liaison and Intelligence Officers, were coming aboard and she didn't have the slightest idea what their mission was. They were both totally unnecessary, in her estimation, since she already had a full complement of 35 officers and crew.

Standing in the ship's inner airlock, watching the monitor with her sergeant-at-arms, Unar Setah, Neferah ground her sharp teeth and grumbled about the foolish state of affairs.

"What the hell do I need two more officers for?" she snapped at Unar. "Maybe the G.C.C. has some lessons to teach us, like how to overcrowd a warship with bureaucrats. What a bunch of crap."

"Possibly we need inspiration and new role models to help us understand the rigors of our monastic lives," Unar purred, "or, it could be they're sending us a couple of well-endowed males to service our savage lusts. After all, we do get horny out here and could use a good stud service."

"Speak for yourself, lowlife."

"Come now, dear boss, we all have our secret fantasies, you know."

"What do you mean by that, scumbag?" Neferah glared at her companion.

"Oh nothing. Of course, what we do in the privacy of our own cabins is. . . ."

"You know, scuzball, every damned sergeant-at-arms I've ever had on my ships has been just as degenerate as you. Why not try to be different? You know, stop acting like a cat in heat."

"I'm not from Tziah, boss. In heat, yes, but I'm no cat."

"Funny."

An ungainly-looking G.C.C. delivery pod pulled along-side the Qualo-Tae's port airlock and extended a short transit tube to the outer ring. After a five-minute pressurization checkout, two uniformed women walked through it into the scout destroyer's outer lock. One looked like a little girl, although she was dressed in a grey security uniform with senior lieutenant's placards on her shoulders. The other wore a Nashramh black naval uniform, but no insignia.

"Permission to come aboard," the taller woman addressed the sergeant-at-arms, her deep red eyes glowing.

"I'll be dipped in. . ." Neferah gasped, "is that you, Miriam?"

The woman nodded and motioned to her companion. "It's good to see you, Neferah. I believe you've already met my associate here, although it was a few years ago."

"Oh, really, you don't look familiar to me," Neferah addressed the little girl. "Hey, Croamer," she turned to her security chief, "this is the first one of your people I ever saw with a smile on her chops."

"Permission to board," Unar nodded, waving the two toward the retina scanner.

Neferah stood back, both bewildered by Miriam's presence and curious about the smiling little creature with her.

Security-Commander Croamer Orr checked Miriam's eyes first, and waved her on with a nod. Then checking the little girl's retinas, she spoke just above a whisper.

"Will you get that dumb-ass faery out of the way, Jenn, so I can make this official?"

"She won't mind, Croamer, just be patient. Neff likes to play at being a card."

"Okay Sister B'Mesziah, I got a fix on you and your friend. I see why you smile a lot, I would too in your situation."

"What the hell are you mumbling about, Croamer?" Neferah chided. "Have you security darlings got some secrets I should know about? Just who is this bird?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," the little girl smiled brightly, "I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Sister-Lieutenant Jannanine B'Mesziah and I'm your new Security Intelligence Officer. It's sure good to see you again after such a long time."

Neferah looked at her silently for a long time, without blinking, then, turned to Miriam. "I know you Miriam, but this . . ." Then, like a shot out of the dark, it suddenly occurred to her. "Jenn, Jannanine B'Mesziah! I can't believe it!"

Unar Setah turned to Croamer and shrugged her shoulders. "I think I'm missing something here, Croamer."

"You are."

After sealing the outer and inner airlocks, the four walked to the captain's conference room behind the ship's bridge. Neferah couldn't get over the fact that her two best friends, from over 5,000 years ago, were assigned to serve with her on an undisclosed mission. She'd rescued Miriam 400 years ago, and could never forget her strangely glowing eyes, but Jenn, that was different. There was so much to tell Jenn . . . about Kin and her binary arrangement with him, and so much more. She even found herself smiling for the first time in years.

"Well, this must be some great assignment to warrant a Sister-Magum and special Security Intelligence Officer," Neferah grinned. "Believe me, you're both welcome on the Qualo-Tae. Most welcome indeed."

"I take it you're old friends," Unar asked, nudging the captain's arm. "Do you mind filling us in?"

"It's a long story, Unar. Believe me, a long one . . . in fact, you were with me the last time I met Sister Miriam. Let's see, that was back in. . . ."

"In 1188," Miriam smiled, "as I recall you were looking pretty sexy in your skimpy costume and shiny earrings."

"You mean when you were all dolled up and got our crew in an uproar?" Unar looked startled. "We never did get that story straight." Turning to Miriam, she grinned. "The boss raised hell with us for whistling at her and making cat calls, but, hoo-ha, she was really a knockout!"

"Can it, scumbag!" Neferah glared. "I let you cruds off easy that time. Don't push your luck."

"What's the real story then?" Unar laughed, ignoring the captain's threats. "It's time we found out who you were out with in that sexy garb. Nobody around here buys that ho-hum story about a rescue. . . ."

"I hate to burst your bubble," Miriam smiled, "but, that's just what it was. A rescue and I was the one being rescued."

"Oh, hell, now you've screwed up all our rumors and side bets. We've had a great time chiding her nibs about this for years."

A meeting of all ship's officers was called and the two newcomers were introduced to them. Neferah motioned to each officer as she introduced them.

"This is Commander Merced Jorgar, my First Officer; Lieutenant Chochel H'Goar, our Navigator; Lieutenant Valoah Nimm of CIC; Lieutenant Binni B'Arb Communications; Commander Manon Sharat, Engineering; Commander Croamer Orr Security; and our Sergeant-at-Arms, Chief Gunner Unar Setah." Then turning her head, Neferah continued. "Please welcome our Council Central Liaison, Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah, and Sister-Lieutenant Jennanine B'Mesziah, our new Security Intelligence Officer." Grinning broadly, Neferah added, "I haven't the slightest idea of what a Security Intelligence Officer does, but I'm sure it's something out of the ordinary."

Jenn's soft voice answered in a language that was so subtle and elegant that everyone, with the exception of Miriam and Croamer, looked at her in amazement. Then, repeating herself in Galactic Common, she said, "I'm an expert in the Borg language which I've just spoken to you in, and also a number of the enemy's most secret codes. Please don't let the fact that I look like a little kid fool

you, after all I'm a Low Elf from a world called Mesziah. I'm a full sister in the Order of the Ginger and the Rose and have a bit of previous combat experience on Nashramh warships dating back to the Great Conflagration."

"Hoo-ha," Merced exclaimed, "I'd never have thought of an elf ever being part of our security force. I've always thought your people were all tough delta types like Croamer and her crowd. I always thought elves didn't have much going for them in the way of smarts, but I could be wrong."

"Our sisterhood is full of little surprises," Neferah added. "I don't underestimate anyone, especially my oldest friends. As to smarts, Sister Miriam is an elf too. Now, let's get down to business and find out what we're up to."

"I'll address the subject first, Jenn, if you don't mind," Miriam leaned forward in her seat, placing her elbows on the conference table. "Put into a nutshell, we're on the run and the enemy's tearing our allies to shreds on every front. We know the G.C.C. navy and security forces have been infiltrated by Jerden agents despite the most thorough screening measures. Our own Council Central and all other organizational functions are now in a constant state of relocation which will be the order of the day from now on. We're also being outmaneuvered on all of our rimworld colonies and seeding projects, which we are now systematically retrieving and relocating to other strategic areas. That's our rather unstable state of affairs as they stand."

Leaning back, she surveyed the group and then continued with her presentation.

"I gather, from your rather bland response, that I haven't told you anything you don't already know. Now, what are we up to? Principally this, the Qualo-Tae and 1,000 other long-range scout destroyers are being assigned to special surveillance positions along the outer sixth and seventh arm rims, along with 2,000 Ansharim warships. We're to observe the enemy's organizational structure, primary communications, and staging areas, the results which we'll transmit to our Councils Central. We'll also prosecute a running battle with the enemy, striking at his communications centers, supply lines, and points of maximum infiltration. We will inflict as much damage to his installations as possible, using Magna-Therm mines and torpedoes on both planetside and naval targets. We will not be squeamish about destroying his cities - that

is, those population centers where he has complete control and has impressed the residents into his Legions of Light. The time is past for philosophizing about innocent civilians being targeted for destruction in populated areas."

Miriam altered her tone to underline her words to the assembled officers. "On the worlds dominated by Sargon's Legions of Light, there are no longer any innocent civilians, only true believers or dead people. As nasty and cruel as it may seem, we're in desperate straits and have to hit him where it hurts. And, that's where he's made his deepest inroads. I might add, here, we are not to expose ourselves to undue risks. We are going out to hurt the enemy, not become casualties of his superior firepower as the G.C.C. navy has. We will not engage any of his warships since our efforts are futile in that respect and our ammunition wasted. We'll use our resources to maximum advantage and not waste a single mine or torpedo in the process. We will remain in the combat zone to the extent of our full operational capacity and will be supplied with ordnance by our own scout freighters, also in the area."

Finishing her introduction, Miriam signaled Jenn to continue with the presentation.

"As you noted from my example, I speak the Borg language perfectly as well as the black ones' other two sub-tongues." Jenn spoke clearly, so everyone could hear. "My role on this vessel is to aid CIC in decoding and interpreting enemy communications that most often confuse our computers and other specialized linguistic equipment. I, and others like myself, am being assigned to deep probe scout destroyers to make on-the-spot analyses of enemy capabilities and to break their codes, so we don't run afoul of their traps. We'll be running in complete radio silence from the moment we leave this station to the time we return to friendly space. Sister Miriam will be our only communications link with our own people, so the enemy won't have anything to go on when it comes to tracking our movements. We'll make all the decisions as to where we make our strikes, and in which direction we'll move. Nothing will be given to the enemy as to what our intentions are until after we've struck and run. As Sister Miriam stated, we have no choice but to hit the enemy where it hurts, and give him no quarter."

* * *

We've visited our colony on Odomah-Tek and seen something of our mission there . . . as seen through Telly's eyes. Now, let's take a look at a similar world 125 light years distant from Palestine and its troubled population. . . .

08:00-14 TALUM 1590-8N5

Jan Norole was a slightly built man standing only 1.8 meters high. His boyish face was dominated by icy blue eyes which no one could look straight into. His blond hair was greying at the temples and his voice softly resonant, adding dignity to his otherwise youthful appearance. He was, according to the Argonel scale, 815 years old.

Jan Norole was the Colmer Lord who secretly ruled Voumot-Tek from behind the scenes for seven centuries. Only a dozen native Colmers knew of his presence and power - they served him loyally and with reverence due to a god. In their eyes, he was a god. None of the political, religious, or other high-ranking leaders of Voumot-Tek, who unwittingly served him, had the slightest idea of his existence. Few of these leaders even understood who the 12 powerful Colmers, who dictated all major policy issues for the entire world, were. Only four of these men were ever in public view while the others posed as obscure private citizens.

Jan sat in back of his private limousine and reflected on the current situation. Capitalization of southern-based industry was proceeding on schedule, as were the money markets and gold hoard. Technological advancements were still slow, possibly requiring another global war to speed the process. Improved breeding programs to replace the poverty-prone masses with more pliable stock were well in motion.

The fourth global war was winding down after six years of bloody combat on five continents and seven oceans. Nearly 1,000,000,000 poverty-prones died in the conflict, falling far short of Jan's expectations. The Death-Head Legions performed well, but the Soproz party's dictator, Frater-Bon, had gotten out of hand making disastrous unilateral decisions, dooming the Katorbon effort to failure. Jan suspected the enemy, or Marah's hidden watchers, had somehow interfered with Frater-Bon during his drug-induced receptive period. This would be investigated, although the dictator was scheduled for termination. Another planetary conflict would be engineered to reduce the poverty-

prones to manageable numbers. Possibly a series of localized conflicts could precede the major event to disguise the real issue.

The limousine stopped at the Grand-Cast Hotel's private entrance in the underground garage and the doorman politely opened the car's door.

"Welcome to our hotel, Illustrious Sir," the man spoke softly and bowed.

Jan nodded to the man as he stepped out of the large vehicle. He walked to a private executive elevator and entered, the open door closed automatically. Inserting a special key into its control panel, Jan activated another door on the opposite side. Entering the second elevator, he repeated the procedure. This time the elevator took him to the building's exclusive penthouse suite.

"Welcome, my Lord," His Holiness, Quan Arcdo Rohan III, spoke softly, bowing as Jan entered the conference room. Each of the other 11 men bowed and offered his own greeting as Jan acknowledged him.

Jan sat at the end of the table and the others followed suit. The meeting was now in order.

The Holy Quan spoke first, giving a detailed report on religious dogmas now being modified to suit the next stage of technological advancement.

"We are leading the inner-flock into our Post-Cellular theological phase, while creating an undercurrent of dissatisfaction within the poverty-prone flocks. Our counter-religionists, especially the Tannons and Infidel Roats, are adding fuel to racial and ethnic hatreds along with foul rumors about our Holy Church. Their success is evident among the poverty-prones in the industrial Imperial Groups. We are concentrating our efforts on the agrarian and underdeveloped poverty zones by promoting unrestricted breeding and socially restrictive political practices. Within 20 years we should be ready for another global conflict which will exceed this one. The setting for divine intercession can be completed during this century as you have ordered, my Lord."

"Have you arranged for safe harbor for our defeated Death-Head survivors, Arcdo?" Jan asked with an air of approval.

"Yes, my Lord. Our monastic and diplomatic orders have already established an underground organization to provide this service. New identification papers and professional positions have been arranged for their leaders and lesser jobs for rank-and-file

stalwarts. Our agents in the Imperial Groups are prepared to initiate the program as soon as Katorbon falls into their hands."

"Thank you, Arcdo."

Liege Leader Len Troed, dictator of the Southern Industrial League of the Sandar Imperial Group, briefed him on the military situation. He concluded his presentation by outlining the Katorbon leader's obvious errors in the Northern Chamer Confederation's loess zone.

"For reasons unknown, our allied armies prevailed over the superior Katorbon Death-Head Legions all along the Chamer-loess front. We are analyzing Frater-Bon's apparent strategy to see if we can give him some advantage over our Chamer allies. But with his unannounced reversals of strategy, we will have difficulty disguising our moves."

"I'm disappointed with our associate, Frater-Bon. I expected more from him. Possibly the irreverent followers of Marah have gotten to him. Yes, I'm disappointed." Jan nodded to Nem Cort the distinguished librarian from the South-Corp World Library. Nem was the hidden power behind all the globe's secret police organizations and the most powerful Colmer in Jan's council. Nem nodded politely, noting that Frater-Bon would be dealt with in a kindly manner. Then he detailed the state of secret police operations in each of the 26 independent global states.

"Our various services have located 9,653,224 off-world creatures during the last 10 years. All have been eliminated in our Death-Head relocation camps. We know of 3,203,193 off-world creatures living on the other continents and have targeted them for relocation during the next five years, providing we can develop an adequate number of brush-fire wars to cover our actions. We suspect Marah's irreverent whores are mixed with these known off-worlders, but few can be identified as such. We estimate a minimum of 2,000 of these creatures are unaccounted for, possibly belonging to Marah's hidden watchers. We are leaving no stones unturned to weed them out and destroy them, my Lord."

Canard Asto and Bane Biscote discussed centralizing the monetary system under one reorganized authority wherein the various currencies of the 26 independent states could be freely exchanged and their values stabilized. A centralized global banking center could keep track of all investments, transactions, and movements of people through their newly developed computerized

information retrieval systems. Once this phase of monetary control became acceptable, a single global government would actually exist. The fiction of 26 separate governments would be kept alive, but all would answer to the financial control of the banking network.

Chuan Nu, Sego Quaet, and Isoe Rerme reported on public education and communications improvements during the past 10 years. Advanced electronic systems made mass communications a reality and with it an unbeatable system of social conditioning. In conjunction with this, the educational systems being introduced into all of the 10 industrial states were geared to segregate the classes while appearing to bring them together. The 16 agrarian states were kept in revolutionary turmoil, preventing meaningful educational systems from being developed. This, along with manufacturing deployment and agricultural restructuring programs directed by Arfoe Mommae and Holy Fathers Moro Febroe and Noster Calon, brought their timetable into line with previous plans.

Signoe Markoe presented the last report, centering on biological and medical research programs.

"Our environmental leveling project has shown marked progress during the past year, my Lord. Our introduction of various new strains of bacteria into the ecosystem will produce a better strain of survivor. Our biological regroup experiments have produced interesting psychological by-products in our test subjects which meet all our primary targets. Introduction of physio-psychological agents from our regroup experiments into the general population will proceed a year after this phase of the war is over. The general effect of these new agents will incapacitate all rational resistance to our final takeover. There won't be a single nonaffiliated individual left on the entire globe who can keep an idea long enough to resist us. Only our faithful inner-flock, who have been inoculated and pre-conditioned, will be exempt from the new agents."

The meeting concluded after each Colmer presented his report and Jan offered his suggestions. The next round of global violence was expected to improve the killing rate of poverty-prones and complete the elimination of off-world infiltrators. Selective breeding and isolation of the upper echelons of global power from the masses would improve the climate for thinning the population to a manageable level.

The next phase of technological planning would include development of mass communications, information retrieval, and interstellar exploration. This phase would require a higher level of worker . . . one pliable enough to accept rapid changes in religious dogma and technologically created events.

Jan Norole considered the latest figures submitted to him by his Colmers and decided to advance his program by 10 years. Sweet Sargon was due soon, and his timetable had to coincide with the event.

Chapter 17

Retreat

The expected results of our G.C.C. Grand Council meeting on Tzalonoah-Ret were never in doubt . . . we would retreat to a stronger position, away from the outer rim, and make our stand against the enemy. Still, there are always surprises in store when moving among enemy agents . . . for us . . . and for them. . . .

14:35-10 SHABIN 1616-8N5

Representatives of 243 star systems belonging to the Outer Rim Proctorate of the G.C.C.'s Grand Council met together at Tzalonoah-Ret, the capital city of Neshim and central administrative center for the 38 star Ishim Confederation. There weren't any pretenses being made with political speeches or gala celebrations to enhance the prestige of the participants. This was an assembly of political and military representatives charged with determining the direction the G.C.C.'s long-term strategy would take for the next 1,000 years. This wasn't a time for rejoicing since everyone knew they were losing the war.

Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor sat at the Nashramh contingent's table in the giant hall where the Grand Council was in session. The other Nashramh members were security and special Necro-Classic people, all Magums, whose job was to observe the assembled representatives and to identify, if possible, Jerden infiltrators. There were 4,920 official participants, most known personally to the security and Necro-Classic observers. The sisterhood's own agents prepared files on everyone, but there were always loopholes, even with the most experienced field operatives. The black enemy

was improving his ability to effectively infiltrate high-grade Jerdens into the G.C.C.'s ranks. It was odd, but only six confirmed Jerdens were in evidence and four other suspected black operatives were being checked out. This fact alone placed the security people on the defensive since they anticipated at least 40 to 100 well-placed infiltrators.

Rinim Poodor's presence at the meeting was specified by the Grand Council's governing board, indicating that she was the target for either capture or assassination. Because of the importance of the meeting, Council Central decided to risk her attending, but special precautions were made to prevent her capture, and hopefully her murder. Four armored personnel carriers were stationed a short distance from the Grand Council's administration and meeting center, with fully armed security sisters ready to drive the vehicles into the building and engage in any kind of fight to prevent such an occurrence. Their scout destroyer the 600 meter-long 'SD Marlene-Ness-Vee', landed inside the Nashramh's Embassy compound and was waiting on combat alert.

The Sisterhood contingent arrived at Tzalonoah-Ret seven weeks earlier and participated in all preliminary meetings leading up to this final assembly without incident. The meetings and work sessions hadn't gone smoothly since everyone had a great deal to lose, no matter what decisions were being made. They were out-gunned, out-maneuvered, and out-thought by their ever advancing enemy, and nothing short of an immediate retreat from the outer rim seemed possible without courting certain disaster. This meant abandoning thousands of well-established outposts, as well as 72,000 planets seeded with special colonists, military intelligence analysts and innocent indigenous populations. Nearly half of these colonies, alone, were in the seventh arm rim. The sisterhood had their Women of the Mission on more than 1,000,000 worlds, and they suspected the Ansharim had even more out in the field, so Rinim and her sisters could well understand their allies' anxieties and frustrations.

The Grand Council's chairman, H.M.E. Torbal M'Smak, had been speaking for the past five minutes and Rinim noted a change in his voice as he announced the results of the Council's official vote of approval.

"We have counted the ballots for each member star system and our decision is unanimous. Article XXXIX, Section 22 of the Central Naval Operations Agreement for G.C.C. Rim Defense is adopted and we shall begin to withdraw immediately from all sectors acutely threatened by the invaders. Our Combined Naval Admiralty will draft additional plans for a general retreat inward from the sixth and seventh arm rim to a line to be determined after the results of our initial withdrawal have been analyzed. Under no circumstances will we retreat beyond the STN Line, or from outer defense rings of any of our member systems. We will pursue a defense strategy designed to keep the enemy off balance and to retard his incursions into the areas he already occupies. This action will not, I repeat, will not involve combined fleet, but will be contained in far-reaching harassing attacks on enemy-held installations and supply lines."

Rinim nodded and informed her Council Central that it was now official, the G.C.C.'s combined navies would follow suit with the Nashramh and Ansharim in their pursuit of the war. They too, realized their frontal actions against the superior enemy were suicidal at best. Now there was a chance to retreat and regroup, while taking a long look at the realities of future naval operations. It would be a bitter pill for the G.C.C. allies to swallow, but they would have to abandon all of their outlying military and commercial bases along the rim. These bases, alone, represented an unimagined investment in personnel and treasure spanning nearly 190,000 years in the sixth arm's outer rim, and 24,000 years in the seventh arm rim.

Ruby acknowledged Rinim's report and suggested it was time she and her contingent return to their embassy. There wasn't anything else she could accomplish on Neshim that the sisterhood's ambassador and her staff couldn't handle. Rinim agreed and nodded mentally to Sister-Magum Bavit Innib, who stepped behind her and pulled her heavy, high-backed chair back for her. Bavit was an old and trusted friend from her ancient past, when Rinim attended her first officer's training program at the Nashramh's Naval Academy back in one-N-four. The two worked well together because of their vast experience and mutual trust.

The marksman silently watched as his target, the stout black-uniformed woman, accompanied by 12 grey-uniformed security sisters, walked through the 20 meter-wide corridor linking the

Grand Council's assembly hall with its adjacent meeting rooms leading to the main lobby entrance. The center woman, dressed in black, had a tiny locator beacon attached to the back of her uniform. The device was installed on the back of her chair before she sat down. Once she leaned back, it joined with the material of her jacket and remained inoperative until activated by another device attached to the hall's exit door. Now her every movement was accurately monitored and there wasn't any chance of the Nashramh witches substituting her with a decoy. Two observers were posted near her contingent's table to discover if the jacket was removed or if anything out of the ordinary happened. Everything was in order.

Thirty-five meters from the exit door, the marksman fired a single shot at the woman, striking her in the back within a millimeter of the locator beacon, blowing a gaping hole in her torso. A second, larger projectile was fired simultaneously from a side corridor, exploding in the midst of her grey-uniformed bodyguard and killing all of them instantly. Armed G.C.C. guards rushed to the scene and blocked off all possible means of escape. The charred and bloody remains of 12 grey-uniformed women lay crumpled around the corpse of the single most important woman in the Nashramh Sisterhood, Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor.

The G.C.C. guards formed a cordon around the corpses and allowed no one to come near until the Nashramh's embassy personnel came to investigate. There was going to be hell to pay for this assassination, and the guards' senior officer wasn't allowing anyone to touch any of them until their sisters arrived.

Four heavily armored combat vehicles crashed through the front doors, nearly running down people congregated in the large lobby, and sped along the wide hall leading to the Grand Council's assembly theater. As the first vehicle stopped in front of the troops guarding the corpses, the other three moved into position around them, and grey-uniformed security women, armed to the teeth, jumped out and cleared the area of all unauthorized personnel.

"Has anyone touched them, Colonel?" the hard-eyed security officer addressed Jenner Louvol.

"No. They were killed instantly by two devices, one of which was loaded with poisoned pellets. We retrieved some of them from the wall over there. My men are searching the area for the assassins, who are probably G.C.C. soldiers."

"Will you station your men outside our perimeter, Colonel? I want to record everything as it is and make positive identifications before removing these bodies to our embassy."

Colonel Louvol ordered his adjutant to reposition his troops and then turned back to the Nashramh officer.

"I know anything I say will sound hollow, but I'm truly sorry that this has happened." Then, saluting, he turned and left.

Sister Commander Inot Kelon walked over to each corpse and studied it carefully, then, when she was sure they hadn't been tampered with, she motioned for her people to place them in body-bags and load them into the vehicles.

"Take special care with Sister Poodor," she spoke hoarsely, "that slug tore her chest open."

"I want every known Jerden on this planet done away with within the next 30 hours," Sister-Magum Gralae Muklan, the Nashramh ambassador, instructed her security chief. "I want it to be bloody as hell. You have the list, and our orders come from Council Central, so don't get cold feet about committing murder."

"We'll take care of it, Gralae, don't worry about our getting cold feet. We can't allow this attack to go unavenged."

"Now, about that locator beacon your people found on Rinim's coat. How did it get there?"

"Quite simply. It was attached to the back of her chair while it was inactive and didn't show on our scanners. Once she leaned against it, a special resin adhered to the fabric of her jacket. It activated when she passed through the exit door to the hallway."

"It's a simple, but effective plan."

"Correct. We've found the hardware and the assassin's weapons, but not the Jerdens who committed the act. They're probably G.C.C. soldiers who were assigned to the guard, and were most likely guarding the bodies when we arrived. In fact, I'm sure they never left the scene."

"I take it you haven't any idea who they are."

"We don't, but we do have the names and identification numbers of every soldier and officer who was in the area."

"Can we be sure that none of the bodies was tampered with after the attack? There was an eight-minute gap between the assault and your arrival on the scene."

"True, but we confiscated the monitoring crystals from G.C.C. security and the backup crystals sealed in the camera units

trained on the assault area. From our analysis of their imaging tracks, nothing's been altered on the crystals themselves. The G.C.C. people appear to have done everything correctly and no one got past them until we arrived. From the expressions on most of their faces, I suspect they were more interested in securing the area and making sure that we didn't have any reason to take vengeance against any of them. We do have a reputation for doing such things, you know."

Sister-Commander Kelon left the ambassador and walked back to the embassy's morgue where 13 bodies were being checked by medical technicians. The fact that nothing suspicious showed on the G.C.C.'s recording crystals indicating anything being planted on the corpses, didn't alter her suspicion that sophisticated locator devices were present. Any of a thousand different kinds of devices from metal fragments, to chemical-based compounds could be secreted on any or all of them, possibly from the explosive charge itself. In her own view, all of the corpses should be disintegrated here at the embassy, and not taken aboard the Marlene-Ness.

"Have you found anything suspicious, Kareen?" Inot asked as she watched the med-tech scanning Bavit's body.

"Nothing, Commander, they're all clean as far as any of our tests can determine, but there's always a chance some kind of inert transmitter will be activated when passing through a triggering mechanism, or being altered when entering into the sub-binary plates. Do you think those monitor crystals were tampered with?"

"Frankly, yes, and I don't want these things taken aboard the Marlene Ness. It's too damned risky."

"You get the proper authorization and I'll zap them out of existence."

"I'll see what I can do, Kareen. Keep checking for fragments or chemical compounds that might be altered by a gravity plate, or sub-binary insertion."

The naked body lay face up, its wide green eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling. A gaping hole in its chest exposed torn and decimated organs. While the pasty grey complexion hadn't changed much, there were specks on the surface where the blood stopped circulating at the moment of death.

"Not a very pretty sight," Gralae Muklan noted, "but violent death never is. I not wants the body disintegrated here because of possible tampering, isn't that right, Commander Kelon?"

"I want them all disintegrated now and in our presence, My Grace. At least, that way, we know our secret won't get out right away, and any locator beacons will be destroyed. It's too risky to take these things aboard the Marlene-Ness."

"I concur," Rinim nodded sadly. "It's certainly strange to see myself lying there with a hole in my chest, even if it's only a facsimile of me."

"I'm surprised the androids passed through the G.C.C.'s scanning," Kairen Loki interjected, "they were controlled by bio-chemical computers, and the bodies appear to be real, but the oscillator circuits and power-pack should've shown up on their scanners."

"But they did, my dear Kairen," Rinim answered, "they were also carrying bio-chemical computers openly on their persons, but these were inoperable units with no oscillator circuits in them. Thus the G.C.C. scanners confused the android's circuits for the bogus equipment. They just didn't know what they were looking at."

"Is their equipment that faulty? Couldn't they pick out the electro-mechanical components in the bodies?"

"No, it's the best available. But, the real trick was that we had scramblers located on each body, which the G.C.C. security people knew we'd be equipped with, so our conversations couldn't be overheard by their electronic monitors. Of course the scramblers also covered up all the electro-mechanical equipment and the power-pack's signal. The trick worked once, but I wouldn't try it again."

"I see what you mean, My Grace," Kairen nodded, "beyond that, they appear to be functional humans both inside and out. Using different types of whole blood from our reserves certainly helped, and the authentic tissues from each race really capped it off. If the enemy got samples of blood and tissue, they'll know they killed living human beings . . . or so it will seem."

Rinim and Bavit stood as witnesses while each of the 13 corpses was inserted into our refuse disintegrator and reduced to ashes. The ashes were then dissolved in nitric acid and the residue strained out in a pumice block. Nothing remained of the specially

produced androids and no record was ever made, of either their manufacture or disposal.

After witnessing the disposal of their duplicates, Rinim and Bavit returned to the Marlene-Ness which was now ready to leave Neshem. Before their boarding, 13 body bags were ceremoniously loaded into the ship's quarantine locker and witnessed by solemn-faced embassy personnel. The invocation to the Eternal's Presence was spoken and the brief ceremony was over. Any observer would understand the 13 murdered sisters' bodies were being placed on board for transfer back to the Nashramh's secret capital. The enemy's intelligence analysts were forced to assume that the non-metallic, chemical based beacons were discovered and destroyed by their Nashramh opponents, since the discrete signals suddenly stopped. Thus, the real reason for their assassination of Rinim Poodor and her security contingent was thwarted. They would have to develop another means to discover where the Sisterhood's Council Central was located. Time was on their side and Sweet Sargon would inspire them.

Chapter 18

Switch

As times change, so do some of our cherished and time-honored procedures . . . even on our most conservative and unchanging bastions of female chauvinism and dominance, the scout destroyer. Imagine, for a moment, having a senior male officer assigned to the SD Qualo-Tae. . . .

13:30-21 JERIN 1616-8N5

The Qualo-Tae broke out into temporal space 103 light years beyond the sixth arm rim's trailing edge, then extended her battle shields and cloaking screens. This area was under enemy control, and his incoming warships and their thousands of giant cargo vessels entered temporal space not more than ten light years further out.

"Get a fix on TBX-1422 and 1490C, Chochel. I want a readout of this as soon as you get it," Neferah spoke tensely to her navigator. "Damn, I didn't like the feel of our last insertion."

Everyone on the ship's bridge was waiting as Chochel calmly went through her paces, and rechecked her figures. Shrugging her shoulders, she casually ran another recheck program through her computer.

"We're right on the money, Captain. We couldn't get any closer if we tried it a hundred times."

"You're sure of that?"

"You bet."

"Damn! I don't like this stupid exercise. Why the hell are we meeting an Ansharim ship out here in the middle of enemy-controlled space?"

"Because the Ansharim people want it that way," Miriam laughed, "and they know what they're doing. Believe me."

"I believe you, Miriam, but still I don't like it. We'll be exposed to the enemy's instruments as soon as we let our screens down. It's unsound policy to sit around unscreened for more than a few minutes, especially in their backyard, unless we're looking for a fight."

"We are looking for a fight, Neferah, and that will begin about five hours after Ardel comes aboard. I don't know what his plan is, but he assures me that you'll love it. He also says they aren't playing games, although it may seem like it at first, so don't get too excited if anything unusual happens."

"What in hell does he mean by that?"

"Don't worry, he'll tell you himself when he arrives."

"Well, I hope the bastard doesn't smell like a dog this time."

"He doesn't, so don't worry about your social problems. There's no need to carry old grudges, Neferah, we have a job to do. So let's get on with it without hostilities."

Checking her chronometer for the tenth time in as many minutes, Neferah called her CIC officer and asked if there were any incoming signals. There was no sign of a vessel breaking into temporal space anywhere within 10 light years distance, which was the limit of their sub-binary scanning antennas. Only brightly shining starfields were visible.

"We have a narrow beam signal coming in from 2,000 kilometers port astern, Captain," Valoah Nimm's voice called out over the comm-link. "It's an Ansharim code sequence, but I don't get any other readings."

"How the hell did they get there?" Neferah stated. "Hold your fire, gunners, but stay on the button!"

"They've been sitting there all along, Neferah. They just wanted to make sure it was us before disclosing their location. Besides, they're testing their own defenses against our probes, and things seem to be working out quite well. They say our screens are perfect and they can't detect any distortion."

"Wow! Am I glad you're on board, Miriam, I'm nervous enough without being able to see them, how can they see us?"

"They can't."

"Then how can they direct a narrow beam at us without knowing exactly where we are?"

"They're directing that beam at me. They can't see us, nor can they pick anything up on any of their scanners. They're just as blind as we are."

"The beam source is moving closer, Captain," Valoah's voice rang out, "to within 30 kilometers. How the hell do they know where we are?"

"I've been guiding them in," Miriam spoke out into the comm-link, "we're trying out a new system for future operations. They have a Magum aboard their ship and I'm in contact with him now. Between the two of us, we're keeping track of where each vessel is in relation to the other. They're using their signal transmission to ensure that we aren't taken by surprise and come up shooting."

"Good thinking," Neferah nodded.

After a short time, the Ansharim signal stopped and Miriam motioned for Neferah to drop her shields for three minutes.

"They'll move up next to us as soon as our shields drop, and theirs will cut out at the same time. As soon as our hulls touch, raise both the shields and screens again."

"You've got to be kidding, Miriam! Our shields will short out against their hull and we'll wreck both of our ships."

"Trust me, Neferah. They've worked this problem out and devised a system for bypassing our shields. Now, let's get this show on the road."

Neferah gave engineering the orders and waited for the resulting explosion, but nothing happened. As soon as the other warship touched against the Qualo-Tae's hull, the battle shields and cloaking screens were extended.

"Well, what did I tell you, Neferah?"

"God! We have to get that equipment on our ships as soon as possible!"

"That's part of this assignment," Miriam smiled, "they are going to install the system on our SRAN shield generators before we separate. Believe it or not, they can do it while our shields are up, and within two hours. Then we separate and it's time to go to work."

"In two hours? I don't believe it, Miriam."

"It's not a problem, Neferah. Our SRAN generators are carbon copies of theirs and the new system plugs into existing backup ports designed in our equipment."

"Into the expansion links, God, I wouldn't have guessed, but it sounds reasonable. . . ."

"We've joined airlocks, Captain," Commander Orr's voice sounded through the comm-link, "requesting permission for the Ansharim team to board."

"Permission granted. After you've checked them out, have one Propulsion-Systems tech escort their people to our SRAN generator, and keep two of your people there while they're working. Have Commander Ardel brought to the bridge as soon as he passes your procedure."

"Acknowledged."

Commander Arden Ardel was escorted to the ship's bridge by Commander Orr. Neferah and Miriam were both happy to see him, although each showed her pleasure in a different manner. Miriam nodded and smiled as he approached and welcomed him aboard the Qualo-Tae. Neferah, on the other hand, squinted at him and asked if he improved any of his disgusting habits since they last met.

"Oh, most assuredly, my little pussycat," he laughed, "I'm finished with all that. By the way, your claws are showing, my dear. Do you have a scratching board to sharpen them on, or am I going to serve as one? I was sort of hoping for love and kisses when I came aboard."

"Look here, dog breath, I'm still Captain on this vessel, and you can forget that little pussycat crap, and yes, you could well become a scratching board if you get smart. Welcome aboard anyway. Now, what's your plan, or am I premature in asking?"

"That's what I'm here to discuss, Neferah. First of all, our technicians are installing the SRAN bypass modules on your shielding and cloaking equipment right now. After the units have been moved into place, it should take about 30 minutes to plug them in and to verify circuit continuity. Then they'll take about an hour and a half to run through the checkout procedures with your propulsion systems people. After that, Miriam will board the Corbol and take my place while I remain on the Qualo-Tae."

"Wait a minute here. What do you mean by this? I haven't been informed of any switches of personnel between our navies. Is this part of our Council Central's plan, Miriam?"

"It is, Neferah. We're testing out a new form of joint venture and an unproven system of attack. Arden knows the Ansharim's battle plans and will keep you posted, especially if my part in the scheme doesn't work. I'll coordinate the Corbol's maneuvers with Arden and keep track of where he is at all times. He'll do the same with me, and that way, both ships can remain constantly cloaked during tight maneuvers without being in danger of hitting one another with our ordnance."

"I see. That was part of our little maneuver when we arrived here, and it's worked so far. I can see we're in for an interesting time."

"Yes," Arden continued, "our next step is to separate and move out into the area where the enemy's convoys normally enter temporal space to make course corrections. We'll jump them there and destroy as many cargo vessels as possible before they reenter the sub-binary. Then, things will really get interesting since we'll follow them down through each plate and continue with our attack. We won't withdraw either our shields or cloaking screens throughout the entire procedure and will avoid their warships at all costs."

"I take it then, those modules you're installing on my SRAN generators have something to do with our ability to cut through the sub-binary plates without dousing our power output."

"Exactly, Neferah, you won't notice any change in your insert characteristics since the modules bypass the ionic flux created by the insert's structural realignment. Those modules have been tested on our vessels for 2,000 years, and we have all the bugs worked out."

"How big are these modules anyway, and how many? They can't be too big or you couldn't get them through the airlocks."

"There are 20 of them, and each is two meters in diameter and 3.6 meters-long, and each weighs 14 tons Argonel."

"Two hundred and eighty tons of what? Gold?"

"Gold alloys and other exotic materials. This isn't some lightweight device that does wonders with the flip of a switch. We have them on suspension units so moving them through the ship is no real problem, nor is the process of securing them to your

reinforced frames and plugging them in. We have accurate drawings of your SRAN generator compartments and the structure around them, so there isn't any guesswork involved in our installation. I have a weight and balance crystal for installation into your central computer that'll solve any moment-arm problems."

Neferah listened without comment, since Ardel was disclosing information she'd suspected for a long time. The Nashramh's and Ansharim's Councils Central had been sharing top-secret information for centuries, and probably longer, and were working jointly with both systems and weapons development. She didn't doubt they were sharing a lot of other things that weren't being advertised. This very mission was proof of it.

Before leaving the Qualo-Tae, Miriam stopped by CIC to see Jenn. She hated leaving her friend, especially when a dangerous situation was lurking just around the corner, but there was no choice.

Jenn was busy with Valoah Nimm and two CIC techs, trying to get as much information as possible about the Ansharim scout destroyer moored next to them. This was a chance of a lifetime to get a look at some of the Brotherhood's secrets. She informed Jenn of the situation, mentioning that Arden was an old friend who could be trusted without question.

"I'll miss you, Miriam," Jenn spoke softly, "but I know we have a lot of problems to solve out here if we're going to survive. Is this Arden Ardel a Magum?"

Jenn had heard about Arden Ardel before, but was confused as to whether he was the same person as Ben Condon whom Miriam used to talk about all the time. She didn't recall Ben Condon being referred to as a Magum, but it really didn't make any difference now. Arden would be her contact with Council Central and other considerations weren't important.

"Yes, and a dear and trusted friend, Jenn. Oh, by the way, he met Telakin a long time ago when they captured Meseosargon. You might want to talk to him about that."

"Oh yes, I'll do just that," Jenn spoke thoughtfully. "How long do you think you'll be on the Corbol, Miriam?"

"It should be between six months and a year, depending on how things work out."

"Then, good hunting, my dearest friend," Jenn stood up and hugged her, "I'll do my best to support your replacement while you're away." Jenn felt a lump in her throat as she said this. Every time they parted before, it turned out to be for the rest of their lives. Maybe this time would be different.

Miriam wished her little friend 'good hunting', and returned for the ship's bridge to debrief with Neferah before leaving. Arden and the Captain had already worked out some of their initial battle plans during her absence, and it was obvious the two would work well together. She could see that Neferah liked Arden by the way she called him "dog breath."

Once Miriam boarded the Corbol, the two scout destroyers separated and made for a spot 9.3 light years further out from the sixth arm rim. During the brief voyage, Commander Ardel was taken around the Qualo-Tae and introduced to the not unhappy crew, all of whom looked like they could eat him alive. After meeting Jenn, he asked Croamer if the little kid was some sort of child genius. She certainly didn't fit his image of a Nashramh security sister and something about the way she looked at him seemed out of place.

"Oh, you'll find that Jenn grows on you," Commander Orr smiled slightly to herself, "she's quite a whiz with enemy codes and her chirpy little voice will cheer you up."

Nothing moved in the silent void and only the cold sparkling pinpricks of distant starfields lit up the otherwise empty space between the galaxies. Both the Corbol and the Qualo-Tae remained hidden on station with their cloaking screens fully extended, waiting for their enemies to arrive.

There was a disturbance registered on the Qualo-Tae's sub-binary tracking screen as the invisible enemy convoy approached its point of insertion into temporal space. At first, it was just a slight movement of a gauge needle, and then it grew to a complex of interwoven patterns on the tracking screen, indicating at least 1,000 vessels rising to the temporal energy barrier. It would be only a matter of moments until the first warships broke through and then the main body of 500 kilometer-long cargo carriers would follow. These lightly armed cargo ships were the real target, and both scout destroyers were poised to leap on them like wild animals, tearing through their numbers, ripping and slashing their

victims until all were either mortally wounded or dead. There was no thought of mercy in the hunters' minds, nor would any be given; this was to be a battle to the death.

The first battle cruiser emerged into temporal space just short of 50 kilometers from the Qualo-Tae, and its bulk nearly filled an entire quadrant of her bridge's grid-screen. Everyone on the scout destroyer was strapped in and had donned their environmental headgear in preparation for the ordeal to come.

Arden Ardel sat behind and to the right of the captain's command chair, and kept up a low-voiced commentary, repeating information coming from the Corbol, stationed 1,000 kilometers to the Qualo-Tae's forward port side. Somewhere in the depths of his mind, he was also watching the Corbol's gridscreen and placing the exact location of his counterpart, Miriam B'Mesziah.

"We count 925 cargo carriers, 65 escort destroyers, and 10 battle cruisers," he spoke softly into his comm-link, "do you agree?"

"We agree," Jenn's tiny voice replied in the unit. "Their signals indicate their course corrections are about to commence in three minutes."

Arden repeated this information to Miriam on the Corbol and the two agreed to begin the attack in 30 seconds. Neferah had been listening to Arden's running commentary and signaled her engineering section to engage their impulse drives on her signal. All of the weapons sections were already primed and ready to fire once the attack started.

Everyone braced themselves for the snap of the ship's forward thrust and sudden changes in direction. This was going to be one hell of a ride, charging into the enemy ships, then dodging one way or the other and attacking another. It would be close.

"Engineering! On my mark. Three, two, one . . . mark," Neferah barked out.

The Qualo-Tae shot forward with a sudden snap as Neferah brought her ship directly in line with the closest cargo carrier, driving straight through its shields, and making directly for its propulsion section. Long bursts of laser fire cut into the enemy vessel's hull, opening a gaping hole into which a single Mag-T torpedo was fired. Two Mag-T mines were released just before the torpedo was launched and each was attracted by the enemy's power core.

Neferah pulled the Qualo-Tae's bow up and shot along the enemy ship's hull, and then out into open space on the other side, and up through the glowing screen.

"Next one coming up," she purred as she brought her destroyer into line with the next victim. Stalking her prey and tearing into him with everything she had brought out the cat in Neferah. It made her feel so much more alive . . . really alive.

"We have major detonations from target number one," Valoah Nimm's voice sounded over the comm-link. "Three of ours and a secondary from him . . . we have a sub-binary detonation! Number one is gone!"

The bridge's aft gridscreen lit up for a long moment as the enemy cargo carrier was blown to sub-atomic particles. Neferah penetrated her second victim's shields and her gunners were cutting into the enemy's hull as they had with the first ship. The enemy gunners were firing out into the void in concentrated boxes, hoping to hit their invisible assailants as they approached their vulnerable propulsion sections.

"They've discovered that we're targeting their power-packs and are now coordinating their fire to catch us as we approach their stern sections," Jenn's voice chirped through the open comm-link.

"Acknowledged," Neferah responded, and changed her angle of attack on the third enemy vessel.

Throughout the entire battle, Valoah Nimm continued to relate the damage inflicted on each enemy vessel they attacked, and Arden Ardel kept up his running dialogue between the Qualo-Tae and the Corbol. Their voices were barely audible above the loud snapping of torpedo and mine launchers and the terrible screams and moans of tortured structural members as the warship twisted and turned in its seemingly erratic attack pattern.

The area inside the enemy convoy was blazing with burning and exploding cargo vessels as the two scout destroyers darted back and forth among them, spewing out laser fire and deadly Magna-Therm warheads. Pinpoint marksmanship made the real difference, since the Mag-'T warheads weren't enough to destroy a 500 kilometer-long cargo ship. Only by penetrating the shielded sub-binary drive sections and detonating their warheads close enough to their massive power generators, could a deadly secondary explosion be triggered.

During the height of the attack, as if nothing had happened, the undamaged cargo carriers readjusted their headings and dropped back into the sub-binary, leaving the damaged ships to self-destruct. Ten escort destroyers and two battle cruisers remained behind to hunt down their unseen assailants, unaware the scout destroyers had already dropped into the first sub-binary plate and were continuing with their attacks.

"Move your heading to the starboard lead elements," Arden instructed, "the Corbol will concentrate her attack on the aft, port section."

"Agreed," Neferah replied bringing her bow around and attacking enemy vessels just ahead. "Engineering, modulate our static frequency, I'm getting a distorted view from here."

"We're working on it, Captain, but we haven't much control with everything choked down. Our drives are just too damned fast for these maneuvers and our sub-Bs' are on rock bottom. We can't pull them down any further without shutting them down."

"The Corbol is having the same problem, Captain," Arden spoke out, "we'll have to break it off when they drop into the next plate."

"Do we have a choice?"

"No. We could tip our hand about our performance characteristics. It's better to do our damage here and let the rest escape for the time being."

"I accept your recommendation. Notify the Corbol that we agree."

The Qualo-Tae shot through the enemy fleet, striking with everything she had before the remaining ships descended to the next plate. The damage inflicted on the cargo carriers was compounded because their energy states were altered after entering the sub-binary. The Magna-Therm warheads exploded with a new force that disrupted their drive units from less accurate hits. The resulting explosions lit up the area as if a star had just gone through a nova.

The Corbol's and Qualo-Tae's cloaking screens were instrumental in saving the two warships from certain destruction during the attack. The screens absorbed increased velocities of sub-atomic particles which were amplified by the alien state of matter in the first sub-binary plate. The bypass modules attached to the SRAN generators made the difference. Just how they did it would be investigated when they returned to base. Both Miriam

and Arden would notify their respective Councils Central about this new discovery once the battle was over.

After the scout destroyers disengaged their enemy, they altered their courses and continued on for 30 minutes before dropping to the second binary plate. Their best estimate of enemy casualties was 104 cargo carriers destroyed and 16 badly damaged. Both the element of surprise and their new tactic of pursuing the enemy down into the sub-binary's first plate made their mission a success. The majority of their success, 76 kills, took place during this second phase for two reasons. The energy levels of their weapons were amplified in the alien environment of the sub-binary and the enemy couldn't drop into the second plate for at least 40 minutes after entering the first plate. Thus, they were stuck to fight it out with an invisible enemy who seemed to know how their communications and battle codes worked. In this, they were correct.

Jenn sat back and wiped her brow with a napkin. Her environmental headgear was fine for breathing and preventing her from being burned, killed by poison gases or the vacuum of space, but it had its drawbacks. It was impossible to blow her nose, which ran and tickled her to distraction during the fight, and perspiration ran down into her eyes. The headgear had both heating and cooling elements built into it, but she was sweating from tension and nothing could combat that. Either way, she kept her attention riveted on the enemy's signals and successfully interpreted their codes. She was actually amazed that she could work so efficiently under such uncomfortable and frightening conditions, but she'd done so with success by keeping Neferah constantly informed of enemy signals.

"Jenn, you're a bloody damned jewel!" Valoah Nimm grinned broadly, patting her on the back. "I swear I won't call you a 'diaper-doll' again as long as I live. You're really something else!"

"But I like being called a diaper-doll, Valoah," Jenn smiled happily, "it makes people underestimate me."

"Okay then, I'll call you cute little names, but out of respect . . . like when the captain calls that Ansharim Magum, 'dog breath'."

"Does she really like him?"

"You bet she does, Jenn. The boss knows how to badger and taunt the best of them, especially when she doesn't like them. And,

come to think of it, she doesn't like most outsiders. But this guy . . . she really likes him."

Jenn thought about this strange friend of Miriam's and wondered what it was about him that bothered her. She knew he was a Magum, and once knew Telakin, but it was Neff who made her feel uncomfortable around him. Yes, Neff was the problem. Neff wasn't acting right, especially when he was near. She would have to look into the matter or Neff would drive her crazy with her screwy little ways. It was bad enough that she wouldn't ever mind, and liked to play tricks all the time, but this hiding and flittering around like a nitwit every time he came around had to stop.

The scout destroyers joined together and a conference was held aboard the Qualo-Tae to determine what their next move should be. Meanwhile, a contingent of six Ansharim technicians came aboard to brief the ship's engineering and security people about the SRAN Bypass Modules. They brought a number of hardbound systems books and special engineering and maintenance crystals with them to provide all the data necessary to operate, maintain and rebuild the modules.

Needless to say, the Nashramh technicians were overjoyed to have their male allies aboard and jokingly suggested they swap personnel. Some even considered abducting a couple of the really good-looking guys, and from Miriam's observations, they wouldn't have any trouble getting all six men, all obviously considering the same thing. The long voyages out beyond the rim were taking their toll, since there were no opportunities for planet side leave these days.

"We'll take Sister B'Mesziah with us as your Liaison Officer, and Brother Ardel will remain with you," Brother Captain Tod Roun confirmed his notes, "and we'll move to target site B-14 and pursue our attack immediately after our arrival."

"I agree with your plan, Captain Roun, and I hope your intelligence analysts are right about this target." Neferah pulled at her chin, studying the situation map on the long conference table. "I'm having a lot of trouble justifying the bombing of populated cities, although I was once involved in destroying part of one some time back. But that was a different situation, and I did what had to be done to capture their so-called god. Killing unarmed civilian populations isn't like torpedoing cargo carriers, although I guess

we could rationalize that an enemy-controlled planet is the same as one of their cargo ships."

"I don't feel any better about it than you do," Captain Roun spoke out, "but we're at a point where we haven't any choice. The black bastards have turned these worlds into breeding grounds for their Legions of Light and there aren't any innocent civilians left there. They are either Sargon's fanatic faithful, bent on conquering our galaxy for their god, or they're dead people. Believe me, that's why our Councils Central made the decision for us to attack these industrial centers. We're being outmaneuvered among the planetary populations, and there's no other recourse. We have to attack and disrupt their artificially accelerated technological complexes."

"That's our problem, Roun, we're being forced to become more like them. Mass murder in any form repulses me, but then, we just murdered a bunch of our black opponent's citizens on those cargo carriers. So I guess I can't be too sanctimonious."

Miriam interceded at this point and ended the conversation. "War is mass murder, my friends. Since when has it been anything else? The moment some young man or woman is inducted into a military uniform, then he or she becomes a legal target for murder. The only real difference between any of the conscripted soldiers and civilians we've ever come across is the uniform. In this case the Legions of Light are drafting everyone into their uniforms and making them active opponents against us. Either we leave this galaxy and let them take it over, or we become a bit like them and fight for our lives and values. We know where we're coming from, and have no choice. We're not the same as them and never will be. Now, let's get on with the show."

Once separated from the Corbol, the Qualo-Tae made for the agreed coordinates. Neither vessel had a visual or electronic view of the other. Only their Magums were able to place where one was in respect to the other. Otherwise, operational routines went on as usual and everyone kept busy maintaining and cleaning the ship's systems and environmental spaces.

Arden was becoming disconcerted about the little elf, Jenn, who was overly formal when dealing with him. There was something about the way she looked at him that caused a flutter in his inner mind. She had a child-like quality to her that made him want to pat her on the head and tell her little stories. Asking Miriam about

Jenn's strange behavior didn't help. She just put it off as the ways of Low Elves.

Jenn, too, was trying to decide what to do about this dark-skinned Magum with his odd expression and his way of treating her like a little kid without being obvious. Finally, she decided to confront him in a way that would bring whatever it was to the surface. If this didn't work, nothing would. She walked to his cabin door and knocked. Confronting the problem head on was the best approach. Jenn had learned a lot since becoming a member of the Ginger and the Rose, and being forthright and honest was at the top of the list.

"Yes, come in," Arden turned from his computer screen and frowned.

"Good day my dear lord, Arden Ardel of the Ansharim Brotherhood. May peace be with you," Jenn smiled coyly.

"Good day to you my dear Jennanine B'Mesziah of the Nashramh Sisterhood. May peace be with you also," he answered.

"My good lord, I have been observing your most unique and interesting behavior for the past few days, and request your indulgence with respect to my forthcoming inquiry."

"Yes, my young subordinate, I will permit your inquiry. So speak it then."

It suddenly occurred to him that they were speaking in the Borg language and using its politely stilted superior-inferior structures. She spoke the language so smoothly and comfortably that he hadn't noticed he was answering in anything other than Galactic Common.

"I say, Lieutenant B'Mesziah, you surprise me. I knew you were fluent in the Borg language, but I had no idea of just how perfect your knowledge was . . . or is."

"I spoke to you thus, in order to get your attention, My Grace. There's something about you that causes a great deal of disturbance to my companion who shares the space of my soul with me."

"And who might that be?" Arden frowned.

"She's a Neszian winged faery whose name is Neff, and she senses something about you that she can't cope with."

Arden broke out into a broad smile and suppressed an urge to laugh. So this was what it was all about. Jenn had a faery flower attached to her soul. How very delightful!

"Have I said something amusing?" Jenn asked.

"My dear Jenn, we're both victims of non-human humor, and I know what's been bothering both of us since we first met. You see, I too have faery flowers attached to my soul, three of them to be exact, and they've been with me for more than 150,000 years. I'm so used to their fluttering around and ignoring all normal conventions that I didn't realize what the problem was." Laughing, Arden went on. "My little creatures have been playing what they think is a funny joke on your little friend, Neff. It never occurs to them that we might get in the way of their games. After all, they don't really occupy the same dimension as we do. Their thinking like ethereal time is non-sequential, but that's winged faeries for you."

Then, cupping his hands together, Arden brought them slowly apart disclosing a tiny egg-shell thin vase with three brightly colored, fern-like flowers protruding from it.

"These are my little friends, Miliek, Frouen, and Mith. I do believe they would like to see Neff in your hands, Jenn."

Jenn was nearly overwhelmed by the appearance of the tiny vase and faery flowers in Arden's cupped hands, but quickly recovered. She'd forgotten that the faeries back at the RAD station had taught her how to bring Neff out, but she hadn't thought about it since then. Cupping her hands together, she slowly opened them as another tiny vase with one bright flower appeared.

"This is Neff, My Grace."

The two placed their tiny vases on Arden's desk and watched as the lovely flowers appeared to grow brighter, and the atmosphere took on a mystical quality. Time and space changed in their very presence as the souls of long-dead winged faeries came together in a place no one had ever thought existed.

The large, grey cloud-covered planet 10,000,000 kilometers ahead of them turned slowly as they approached from the sunward side. Valoah Nimm and her CIC technicians counted 15 battle cruisers, now visible on their high magnification scanning screen, 36 escort destroyers in high orbit above the cloudy surface, and 325 huge cargo carriers in a lower orbit.

On the surface, seen through the thin grey cloud layer, were large brown and tan land masses, and blue-green oceans. No surface features were visible as the two scout destroyers continued to move toward the distant planet.

Earlier, Neferah and her officers had reviewed their battle plan over a large chart of the planet, named 'Worsel', beamed through the top of her conference table. Of the six major industrial and four giant administrative cities controlling the planet's populations, they'd been assigned to strike site A-3 and M-4, both on the same continent. The Corbol would strike two large cities on the other side of the planet. The destroyers would climb out of the atmosphere to strike at the nearest cargo carriers before dropping into the sub-binary and making their escape. If things went as planned, and they didn't encounter mine concentrations around the planet, the enemy wouldn't have time to react and pursue them. Their real problem came from their shields, which, even with the SRAN Bypass Modules, would cause energy discharges that glowed in the upper atmosphere and could be seen from both above, in space, and below on the planet's surface.

Because of the unavoidable energy discharge which would be brightest when they entered and exited the upper atmosphere, the two destroyers had to make directly for their primary and secondary targets without slowing down or deviating from their attack route. Once they'd fired their torpedoes and accelerated up and out of the atmosphere, they had to cause a lot of confusion among the enemy fleet to escape.

Unfortunately it was impossible to fire their Mag-'T' torpedoes from outside the atmosphere and then make a run for it, since the enemy had well-positioned orbiting defense satellites designed to fire immediately at any unidentified intruder. Only their highly sophisticated countermeasure equipment and cloaking screens could pass through the enemy's defense net, making their attack possible. Their countermeasure devices disabled enemy satellite tracking systems while the energy discharge was visible, and confused their fleet for a short time while they attacked the cargo carriers. Time was of the essence, since the CIC sections on the black battle cruisers were exceptionally fast at detecting scrambler frequencies used on each of these devices and neutralizing them. Now it was time to go on the offensive and outmaneuver the enemy.

Jenn reported only normal signals from the enemy fleet as they passed toward Worsel's upper atmosphere and everyone braced themselves for the initial shock. Everyone was suited-up and strapped in their reinforced battle chairs which hopefully would

withstand the shock of hitting the unresisting atmosphere. The fully extended battle shields would take up some of the shock and dissipate frictional heat generated by their passage, but the ship itself would still take a hell of a pounding. This wasn't an everyday affair and the 600 meter-long Qualo-Tae wasn't designed for such maneuvers.

Neferah drove her shuddering warship down through the thickening atmosphere and made directly for the coordinates of site A-3, now visible 300 kilometers ahead and below.

"Fire number one spread!" she called into her comm-link as the targeting ring on her forward gridscreen suddenly glowed bright red.

Three loud snaps, in quick succession, sounded aft of the bridge as the Magna-Therm torpedoes were fired out of their port-side launchers. The streaking torpedo canisters were seen on the gridscreen, moving straight for the sprawling city ahead of them. Neferah pulled the Qualo-Tae's bow around in a roll, without reducing speed, and made for her secondary target. She hadn't realized how vast the enemy's administrative city, with its towering buildings, really was and now had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as the aft gridscreen lit up with three brilliant flashes. "My god," she thought to herself, "we've just murdered 10,000,000 people!" She didn't care what the rationale was, this was downright murder.

Approaching the second target, six minutes later, the CIC's radar probes began registering the enemy's defense screens coming to life ahead of them. Bright beams of laser fire and three tiered missile explosions broke out directly in their path. The starboard-side torpedo technicians set their deadly machines to move below the enemy's defenses, just above the treetops, and to alter their altitude after reaching the detonation zone. Countermeasure devices in the torpedoes' warheads, aided by the Qualo-Tae's signal scramblers, effectively neutralized the defenders' jamming transmissions for the critical time required for the torpedoes to reach their targets and detonate. Otherwise the attack was a repeat of the first and after firing her torpedoes, Neferah pulled her vessel's bow straight up and made for the enemy's low orbiting cargo carriers.

"Weapons sections, prepare for attack procedure aleph-dalet. This is going to be a fast one," she spoke into her comm-link, the sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach increasing all the time.

"The enemy has already raised their battle shields", Jenn's voice chirped out, "They have us located by our static discharge track."

Neferah waited until they were above the atmosphere and completely in the vacuum of space before altering her course three times and then attacking a far-off cargo carrier. She figured the nearest ones to her point of exit would be directing concentrated fire at where they thought she'd be attacking from. She altered her attack angle to approach the huge vessel from its bow and moved back along its hull where her gunners and weapons people did their work.

The Qualo-Tae only hit four enemy cargo carriers, destroying two and seriously damaging the others before dropping into the sub-binary and leaving the area. The enemy was well-situated for defending their fleet, and both the Qualo-Tae and Corbol were fortunate not to have been hit by either the enemy fire or their mine screens.

Neferah kept her feelings to herself, since she knew what her job was and why it had to be done. She was, first and last, a naval officer with a responsibility to both her sisterhood and the innocent masses of human beings in her beloved Starset Galaxy.

Chapter 19

Equation

The human experience of being alive in this temporal universe is accompanied by a sense of terror in all of us. Yes, because there's a price to pay for everything . . . nothing is free or without its heavy hand of responsibility. Whether we're at the top of our sacred order, or at the bottom, makes no difference . . . we must face that equation every moment of our lives . . . especially when it comes to loyalty.

16:00-14 BENEM 1617-8N5

Most-Reverend-Sister Mirisca B'Mesziah-haTolohn stood silently watching through eyeless sockets as deep purple clouds, swept along by swirling winds, paraded across the darkening sky. Her companion stood in the shadows and waited for her to compose her thoughts before continuing with their discussion.

This wild and turbulent world, with its high barren mountains and un-breathable atmosphere, was strangely beautiful, especially when the sun was setting and bright electric flashes in the dark rolling clouds dotted the horizon. Nature, raw and powerful, seemed to amplify the atmosphere in this shielded room in the Nashramh's Necro-Classic Restart Program's control center. It appeared as if the process of life incarnate and its violent end in death was reflected amid this primordial setting with all its frightening implications.

Mirisca could feel a deep-seated fear in the pit of her stomach, a terror of being. Yes, of being aware. These emotions were mixed with the dynamic surges of contained energy outside that seemed to emulate the paradox of life and violent death faced by all human

souls. These eternal human souls in their spiraling ascent from the shadowy ethereal domain of Yetsirah to the charged reality of temporal time and space faced the same violent tremors as the bright flashes outside. Those who feared death had little to worry about, for the process of rebirth into the exile of unpredictable corporeality held the most terror. Both the process of birth and dying were couched in pain, but emerging into the unknown forces of a hostile world as a helpless creature with a shrouded soul was by far more terrifying.

"My god," Mirisca spoke aloud to herself, "we all strive to enter this veil of agony and do everything possible to prolong its torments, only to be deprived of our well-deserved peace in death. We're a strange lot, My Grace, damned to a lonely struggle for fleeting sensual pleasures and human companionship, while we destroy one another because of our shortsighted ignorance and ill-measured bodily juices. Yes, we are a strange lot."

"Does the prospect of another corporeal experience after Nathan's body dies, bother you that much, Mirisca? Or, are you speaking for Nathan?"

The slender figure stood silently, for a space of time, the eyeless sockets studying the ever darkening sky with its distant flashes of unleashed energy. Was she bothered by the prospect of the unknown, or was she mixing her own feelings with Nathan's? In all of her hundreds of incarnations, spanning more than 100,000 years of temporal experience, she should be used to the prospect. But that wasn't really the issue. It wasn't her own, nor Nathan's fear of entering a new body after a short ethereal rest. No, it was more than that.

"No. I don't fear for myself, or for Nathan, My Grace. It's those poor human masses for whom I fear. We have some control over our destinies, but for most of them it's fate that rules. We have choices, while most of them don't. My short time with Nathan has taught me much."

"How is that?"

"I've been on some brutal worlds and suffered torture and death there, but this was different. My short experience at Birkenau with those ill-fated people on the loading ramp did something to me. I can still see their faces and feel their desperation. Their lives were over . . . I knew it and they only suspected. Maybe they are blessed by their shrouded memories, but I'm not. Men, women, and

children who hadn't committed any kind of crime were being herded into a slaughterhouse like poor animals. The less fortunate of them were sentenced to hard labor for the remainder of their brief lives, their faces still haunt me, Rinim."

"Your life under primitive conditions on a world rent with contradictions has overwhelmed you, Mirisca. I can understand the experience you speak of, especially your ability to control your own fate at the time when others couldn't. But remember, it makes no difference to the over-all scheme of things since dying isn't the only issue. You and I were in that same desperate state long ago when we were caught in a position of no return. More so for myself, but not so long ago that I can't remember, if I try. Being provided with a shroud around our souls seems to be unfair, but being without one has its special price. Eternity is a very long time, and we've only begun our journey. Our memories can well be a curse on us."

"I can't imagine you having been through hard times, My Grace. You seem so . . . so gentle and exempt from the loneliness that others wear on their sleeves."

"Oh, I've had more than my share of loneliness and pain, my dear Mirisca. I can still remember a time so long past . . . more than 3,000,000 years ago . . . when I came crashing down on an uncharted planet. I remember the fear of dying alone, then being helped by a creature so terrifying that he should have been something seen only in a nightmare. Since then, I've been blessed with the company and warmth of countless men and women over the ages . . . and I've experienced their loss . . . over and over again. It hasn't been a peaceful time with happy endings. No, this past half million years has been an endless progression of pain and human tragedy . . . none I can ever forget. Oh, there've been so many of our people sacrificed in this terrible current of Eternity. Our innocence has been lost defending this embroiled galaxy, and we've gained nothing for our sacrifice and dedication but a new round of war and suffering. Still we continue to do our best."

"I know, My Grace, but things have changed. I've heard about the new arrangements being made for trials and admonitions for many of our unfortunate sisters who've served out on the rim. I'm told they're to be punished for surrendering to their human frailties. It's this hell they're condemned to that distresses me.

They're our sisters, and most of them were new and untried when we sent them out to those hostile worlds."

"No one is being condemned to any hell, my dear," Rinim spoke from the shadows, "although they may feel that it is in comparison to their present assignments."

Mirisca watched, through Nathan's eyeless sockets, as the last light from the distant sun disappeared below the horizon and only the flashes of lightning remained. Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor was her closest and dearest friend, and it seemed strange that this ancient and com-passionate human being could ever consider long-term punishment for her 'Sisters of the Mission', especially when they weren't seasoned to their duties and responsibilities. She could still remember her own early years of confusion and loneliness, when she too made foolish mistakes.

"The prospect of their fate seems harsh to me, My Grace. Can't their judgments be tempered with greater compassion?"

"There's an equation governing all of our actions throughout our entire mission, and it's impossible to ignore them when we discuss our Necro-Classic Restart Program, my dear Mirisca. You already know, the majority of our Women of the Mission serving on the seventh-arm rim-worlds are newly recruited sisters who're unreliable at best, especially when it comes to remembering what their actual responsibilities are after reincarnating four or five times in as many centuries. But, there is a more important factor that must be addressed, concerning those who are in sub-level concert with their Necro-Classic coaches, and still turn their backs on their missions, and desert our cause. Remember this. They're being tested for their loyalty as well as being trained to defend their own worlds against Sargon's host. When they fail the test, so do we and we all suffer for it. This phenomenon is new to us and we find it unforgivable."

"Are there infiltrators who've gotten past our security screen, Rinim? I can't imagine our sisters actually turning their backs on their sworn duties unless they were frauds in the first place."

"No, they are neither frauds nor infiltrators my dear. They are run-of-the-mill humans who're still symbiotic in nature and lack grey matter between their ears. I'm afraid to say it too openly, but they're pretty well a bunch of shallow little twits who think only with their ovaries, not with their minds. The phony glitter of worldly pleasures and so-called freedom from ownership they seek,

translates to irresponsibility. Their ideas of freedom are no more than moral license and, more often, absolute treason."

"I've never heard you speak so harshly before, Rinim. Is it all really that bad?"

"I'm afraid so," Rinim shook her head sadly, "we're losing on all fronts, and now we're losing from within. I'm partly responsible for this problem, though, since I was one of the program's sponsors. It never occurred to me that these creatures could be so shallow and disloyal."

"That's why we're altering the schedule for our Necro-Classic Groups and our restart program, I presume?"

"Yes. As I said before, there is an equation we can't escape, especially when it comes to dedication and loyalty. Loyalty from us must be balanced with loyalty from each of them. Within each cells dedication and loyalty is absolutely necessary from each member, or their entire mission is jeopardized. Fragmented cells are ineffective, and to transfer replacements is dangerous. Our system of using cellular units was designed to protect each unit from being discovered or sold out by infiltrators. Once there've been defections within a cell, then the remaining members get pretty paranoid about their safety and ability to function effectively. It's happened on so many worlds, that we can't ignore the problem. We have to harden our hearts and punish these defectors when their gamma-complexes are retrieved, since we can't trust them to serve honorably in our restart program. We just haven't any time to coddle these wretched creatures."

"I understand your words with my mind, My Grace, but still, in my soul of souls, I feel frightened for them."

"So do I, Mirisca."

"If we don't correct the problem now, what will happen in the future?"

"We will fail."

The two women stood staring out into the darkness as each harbored her own private thoughts and feelings about the program they were about to start. Revenge for the transgressions of their own sisters wasn't part of the Nashramh's way of doing things, although the rim fleet had initiated isolated cases of harsh punishment against some of their naval personnel. But, by and large, the Nashramh Sisterhood strove to administer lenient and compassionate judgments to its wayward sisters. Now the overall

situation was different and they too had to change or face the prospect of internal decline. Their punishments had to be severe and protracted when necessary, but not devoid of either reason or compassion. Thus, the Necro-Classic Restart Program, for the seventh-arm's Women of the Mission, would be divided into categories based upon a number of considerations, not the least of which concerned desertion and treason.

"I shall return to my assignment, Rinim. I haven't as yet completed my mission there."

"I know. Nathan's body won't last much longer, even with the restoration work our surgeons performed on it. You must meet with the leaders of that unspeakable brotherhood again and get them to listen to reason. Otherwise, they're Sargon's property."

"I fear for them, Rinim. They're brilliant in so many ways, otherwise they appear completely insane. It was a mistake to place them on that world in the first place."

"True, but that can't be changed now. We did what we thought was right at the time. We were wrong. Now time is running out and we have to decide what to do next. The house of HaGar must be dealt with as well as our deserters, and I don't know how it will turn out. No matter what we do, it will require some hard decisions and unfortunate punishments. There is no other way."

"Then, I must bid you farewell, Rinim. Thank you for coming to see me . . . it's been so long."

"It won't be much longer before you return, Mirisca. And, you are to bring Nathan with you, for he is one with us now. We owe him more than a debt of gratitude for the use of his body. Yes more than just that. You, Nathan Levi, have been a true friend, and we receive you among us as that, and more."

Most-Reverend-Sister Mirisca Rinim B'Mesziah-haTolohn and her erstwhile bosom companion, Nathan Levi, left the Necro-Classic Restart Program's control center on the SD 'Collen-Vee' which was to take them back to Mirisca's assigned world. She was armed with new instructions that were tantamount to an ultimatum. "Change your ways now, and join together with us, or remain here as Sargon's slaves."

The voyage took nine months. Mirisca traveled extensively and spoke privately with the most powerful and influential men in the ill-fated brotherhood, but none would either believe her or give in to her ultimatum. Despite all of their brilliant and compelling

arguments, these cruel and shortsighted men chose to hold on to the illusion of power they held too dear to part with, and to remain on this world at all costs. Nathan Levi's body died, in the North American city of New York, 18 months after arriving back on Odomah-Tek. Mirasca's binary-soul moved into the body of a Nashramh agent with whom she had met in Palestine. Nathan Levi's gamma-complex came into the new body with her. He was destined to return to the stars with her in a few short years.

* * *

Sharp reports of gunfire came closer as Jan Norele left his private office at the KALTEM Corporation's ERA Building. Apparently terrorists were attempting to storm the building and capture the pharmaceutical laboratory on the third floor. What they'd actually do with the laboratory once they had it, was an interesting question. Jan had no doubt that so-called revolutionaries would rifle through the mind-altering drugs and use them on themselves. They were nothing more than boorish children with automatic weapons. There wasn't a genuine intellect among them. The attack could be advertised in the mass media as a heroic venture, with the slaughtered rebels pictured as heroic martyrs. The more these gutter heroes came out of the woodwork, the better. Their futile attempts at revolution certainly disguised what was really happening, and served as another tool for implementing the final takeover.

As Jan walked leisurely along the second floor hall, a young man in battle fatigues darted into the corridor in front of him. Without pausing, the man fired his automatic rifle, spraying a dozen rounds at Jan.

Jan merely dropped to the floor, spun toward the man's legs and kicked them out from under him. Jan's speed and agility were beyond anything these primitives could imagine, and within seconds the man lay dead, his neck broken. He retrieved his briefcase, then stood to the side of the hall as he heard footsteps approaching.

Activating his cloaking screen, Jan stood silently watching as two brawny young specimens rounded the corner.

"They got Meart," one cried. "God, they got Meart. We gotta get outa here!"

The two turned and fled the way they'd come. Jan shook his head, wondering how such inept creatures had made it this far. Shots sounded from around the corner as the building's guards encountered the two terrorists. Then there was silence.

Once the gunfire stopped and green-uniformed security forces began scouring the building for stragglers, Jan walked through the lobby with his cloaking screen still up. He normally kept his screen and deflector shield raised when walking anywhere outside his office building. They hid his movements and permitted him to observe field operations without subordinates knowing it.

The security police had lined 42 of the terrorist's corpses in a row outside the lobby for the photographers and intelligence people to check. Nine of the corpses were women; two still quite attractive even in death. Everything was going smoothly as the guards secured the building and maintenance workers began cleaning up. Meart had led 41 of his followers into this little scrap, and hopefully other resistance chieftains would do the same. A good deal of propaganda could be generated by these bungled attacks, making them appear to be heroic and effective strikes against the regime. Things were definitely looking up as far as Jan was concerned.

It seemed odd that Marah's operatives hadn't had a hand in these outbursts. Jan began to wonder if the Sisterhood's numbers had been so reduced in the last war that they couldn't field an effective force. Every recorded attack on corporate and government facilities over the past five years lacked intelligent planning. The revolutionaries never understood the terrain they were attacking and chose obscure and foolish targets. Part of this was the result of biological agents being fed into the food and water supplies, and the rampant use of mind-altering drugs. But the absence of Scoffing Marah's Inter-binary Intelligence Organization was something new.

Thinking about it for a moment, Jan realized that their inter-binary communications were also on a decline, possibly only a few operatives acting as if they were tenfold in number. They were clever with their changes of identity and speech patterns. They could be putting up a front for his sub-level intelligence monitors and necro-link disrupters. Had they actually pulled out and left Voumot-Tek without a fight? There wasn't any apparent reduction in their colonist's ether-bodies entering Marah's impenetrable

Necro-Assembly Units. Were their numbers being disguised? The idea was intriguing, but not necessarily true. Their absence bothered Jan, since the women could have developed a different strategy to infiltrate his local forces.

Jan watched the news team filming their report for the government-controlled broadcasting station, noting that they understood exactly what they were doing.

Cool afternoon shadows were blanketing the concrete portico in front of the lobby doors, making the terrorists lifeless faces appear something less than human. The autumn air was still muggy and the acrid odor of gun-powder and burning gasoline hung over the portico as busy maintenance men began to scrub the pavement with mops and brushes. No one actually cared about the bodies being photographed and studied by newsmen and security analysts.

Leifor Tatter, ARTM's video reporter, and his production coordinator, Bret Wosak, stood looking at their improvised scripts and determined what changes to make for the next shooting.

"We should downplay the security forces' losses, Leifor. Say . . . instead of '13 killed and 26 wounded', how about 'several killed and more than a dozen wounded'. What do you think of that?" Bret spoke as he jotted notes on the script.

"Yeah, we can pan the terrorists' faces when we say it and then focus in on their weapons. Those TR60's are from the last war, the same kind as Frater-Bon's Death-Head Divisions used. We can draw a parallel there."

"Right, I'll put it in here, just after you give the background statistics on other raids. Make sure it sounds like they're heroes, but sort of shoddy ones. Okay?"

"You got it."

News photographer Roushi-Mon loaded his 50mm Super-Contrex video camera with a new magnetic tape, handing the exposed cartridge to Telso Lind, his second assistant.

"Get this to the station right away. I'll take some close-up shots of their faces for Tagger before the security people cover them. And, tell Andrick to get his ass over here. I need better lighting."

"You bet," Telso grinned. "Andrick's over there sucking up to that building manager, probably trying to get a better job."

"So what're you trying to do, bitch? Cut him out?"

"Naw, I was just being funny, boss." Telso's face flushed. "I'll get this stuff delivered right away."

Roushi-Mon ignored her and checked his camera before returning to the row of corpses.

Telso walked over to where Andrick was talking to the bored-looking building manager, and told him the boss wanted more light.

"Okay, okay, don't get in an uproar. I'm on my way," he glared, resenting the intrusion.

Telso shrugged and turned to leave when there was a sudden chill in the air. She felt the presence but couldn't see anyone nearby, other than the building manager and Andrick. The unnerving chill remained for a few moments then moved away.

"Something bothering you?" the building manager asked.

"Oh, nothing . . . uh, the bodies I guess. . . ."

"You should be used to that stuff by now, kid."

"Yeah, I guess I should."

Telso recovered her composure and made for the broadcasting station. She had to deliver the recording cartridge right away, or she'd be looking for another job. After that, she had to report the strange occurrence to her Nashramh Control. There was no question about it, she'd encountered an invisible alien presence that was both cold and powerful. It had to be a Jerden or Colmer Lord. God, the experience really unnerved her.

Jan Norele hardly noticed the swarthy-looking photographer's assistant as he passed Harloe Shode, the building manager. Shode was doing his best to look bored and underplay both his security forces' casualties and damage to his building. The news people appeared satisfied with his account and were downplaying the corporation's losses. Other would-be terrorists would interpret the message as just the opposite of the newscaster's presentation. Reverse psychology always worked with these hot-headed children, while the corporate citizens were assured they were being protected.

Smoke from KALTEM Corporation's ERA Building was still visible from 10 blocks away as Jan walked casually through the city's Sub-College District. He reflected on the state of affairs while watching underfed middle-class students talking together in seemingly intellectual tones. There wasn't a real intellect among them, but they weren't aware of it.

Society in the South-Corp Confederation and the other 25 independent states had finally been brought to the brink of disaster, and people were confused and frightened. Nothing they did had the slightest effect on curbing the growing violence in the streets and roving gangs of youths bent on supplying their deadly habits. The secret police's propaganda machine cranked out inflammatory and contradictory accounts on every occurrence, making black appear to be white. Broadcasters shouted out against foreign-based infiltrators who subverted everything decent with their mind-altering drugs and corrupt influences. No one, not even the most respected politicians and religious leaders, could escape their bribery and extortion for long. Loose women and unnatural men mingled with every social level, destroying the fabric of a once family-oriented society with disease and moral corruption. Young girls and children were abducted and raped before being thrown away with the garbage. Something drastic had to be done, and soon.

Only the Orthodox Church's Inner-Flock were exempt from the turmoil that decimated the rest of society. Cries from every quarter demanded that government do something to save the country from total anarchy. There was no longer any talk of freedom, since everyone was a slave to the depraved addicts and violent desperados who ruled the streets. No one was safe, even in his home. The stage was set for creating protective internment camps. People forgot the Katorbon Death-Head camps at Crumot-Vo, Lonta-Nom, Boulton, and elsewhere. The government and the Holy Quan's Orthodox Church were the only hope people had for salvation. There was no other answer.

Jan made note of the preponderance of biologically altered specimens on the streets, many of them staring stupidly through dull, listless eyes. The news media didn't have to spell out that these creatures were less than human; they advertised it with their dull-witted actions. Few had enough intelligence to learn a simple trade, and the majority spent their lives breeding and wandering around in a narcotic induced stupor. They were well-suited models for turning the public's attention away from the real issues and demanding easy remedies.

The next war would reduce the able-bodied and mentally alert to fewer numbers, leaving only these degenerate biological specimens. They would destroy themselves within a decade,

providing the government continued to protect them from official sanctions. Later, the special internment camps would seal their fate along with other undesirable elements.

Chapter 20

Strategy

A change in position doesn't necessarily mean a reversal of goals, especially in military operations. Only a fool will stand his ground against overwhelming odds . . . but, then there are times. . . .

16:00-05 SHABIN 1617-8N5

Commander Neftalak B'Messiah spoke evenly and casually to the G.C.C. Heavy Cruiser Hollenborn's third torpedo section's assembled officers. The men and women were seasoned veterans of the G.C.C.'s rim fleet and none liked the idea of running from the enemy, no matter how the subject was presented.

"No human being can save another who doesn't have the will to save himself. Nor can a change of human values be initiated and managed from outside. This rule is thoroughly understood by Belial's agents, and fundamental to his theory of subversion and conquest. His agents appear as the champions of every human institution and moral value, while actually subverting a population's will to resist what is clearly self-destructive and evil."

Neftalak studied his audience before continuing. He knew how they felt about deserting the rimworlds, but the situation was deteriorating rapidly, and a general retreat was the only answer. Otherwise, the war would be completely lost in the foreseeable future.

"It's of utmost importance that we keep an open mind to the realities of our situation," he spoke out, "since our ultimate goal is to defeat the invaders and drive them out of our galaxy permanently. Undisciplined bravery and futile gestures in the face

of overwhelming forces won't do anything except speed up the process of our own defeat. Therefore, our G.C.C.'s Grand Council has determined, and so directed, that we are to withdraw our armed forces to a more advantageous position. This is neither a rout nor surrender, as some among us have charged, but it is a general retreat designed to give us both time and strength to prevent a defeat in the field.

"Now with respect to the human populations we've been protecting out on the rim. We've no intention of completely abandoning them to the enemy. This we will not do. We are removing our outnumbered and outclassed surface and naval units from the area. Our general resistance to an enemy takeover along the rim will be pursued on other fronts and by means other than naval engagements. Remember this, there is more than one kind of protracted operation at our command, and we'll be employing different kinds of resistance all along the rim. The fight is far from over and, in fact, is only just beginning.

"The populations that have already succumbed to the enemy's offensive, especially his subversion and gradual takeover, are considered enemy satellites, at least for the foreseeable future. There is no way, nor are there resources available, for us to protect these satellite populations, since they have neither the will nor desire to defend themselves. We know many of these enemy satellite populations have willingly and aggressively joined with the invaders, although small numbers of them were actively employed against the process."

Commander B'Mesziah went on to discuss the general plan of withdrawal from the G.C.C.'s far-flung array of rimworld bases and naval installations. All loyal native people wishing to accompany them would be transported to less populated worlds located in the mainstream star systems where they could prepare for full G.C.C. membership. These transplant populations, in the hundreds of millions, would stay together in their native demographic groups. Those who chose to remain and resist the enemy's control over their home worlds, would be supplied and aided if possible, but this wasn't being seriously considered because of difficulties encountered in long-range logistics. Closing his remarks, Neftalak addressed the subject of harassing raids into enemy-controlled space.

"We will not engage the enemy in deep penetration raids from this date onward. Our main line of resistance is too far away from the outer rim to give us any advantage, although we will continue to harass the enemy a maximum range of 30 light years from our outermost bases. It's important for each of you to understand that this is a strategy based solely upon the realities facing our G.C.C. navies. The enemy's forces outnumber us and their fleets are growing geometrically. They outclass us many times over, and outmaneuver us in every respect. We're buying time now. We're buying time to recover from the drubbing we've suffered for the last 2,000 years. To do otherwise would be committing collective suicide."

Commander B'Mesziah returned to his private office in the Hollenborn's Strategic Operations Planning Division and checked his daily calendar. He'd be addressing the fourth torpedo section's officers at 08:00 in the morning. Briefing 20 officers at a time was a good way to get the message across, since each could question him without crowding his agenda. It was important that each officer understand all the facts and the rationale behind the navy's decision to withdraw, otherwise they'd find it difficult to maintain morale among the crew. The process of addressing all of the 30 groups assigned to him, three per day, was cumbersome but necessary to his success. This was a touchy situation at best, and Admiral Costrand wanted 100 percent concurrence from everyone in his command. The day for blind obedience was long past, and well-informed subordinates were by far superior to any other alternatives. Given real facts, and proper reasons for strategic planning, his officers and crews would know they were doing the right thing. Neftalak shared the Admiral's view and was proud to serve under his command.

Sitting alone at his desk reflecting on his presentation, Neftalak found himself wondering what the Nashramh people were doing out here. Were they pulling out too?

"That's funny," he thought, "no one's ever discussed them. I can't imagine them abandoning anything, no, not those fanatics."

Smiling to himself, he wondered what a better word would be for fanatics. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he remembered the events that took place during the Great Conflagration and the penalty the G.C.C. navy paid for their treachery against the Sisterhood. And, there was that strange Nashramh woman, with

those soft, red-black eyes, whom he'd known and completely misjudged. Yes, her name was Miriam, and someone suggested that she was a senior admiral in their fleet. He could've sworn she was present during his trial . . . yes, it was a trial, but where it was held he couldn't remember. With women like that . . . with their mystical powers, he knew they wouldn't abandon one millimeter of either ground or space. It seemed odd that he was thinking about them now, and he wondered what he really meant by fanatic. Somehow the word didn't fit . . . maybe fanatically dedicated was more appropriate. Yes, far more so.

Nodding, Neftalak resumed his review, deciding he'd give more thought to this Nashramh question. He had a vague, but growing feeling they were important to the G.C.C.'s and his own future, and were valuable allies. He couldn't put his finger on it, but for some reason it didn't seem like a good idea to discuss the subject with anyone. This feeling, too, needed some real thought.

* * *

The 100 warships of the G.C.C.'s XIVth Tactical Battle Group led by the Heavy Cruiser Hollenborn, accompanied by 600 cargo carriers, began their planned withdrawal from Chanselen-Tek, in the Raegnol Star System on the trailing edge of the sixth-arm rim. Their helms were set for a point more than 180 light years away where the outer limits of the defense ring were set at TBQ-4066C. Their final destination hadn't been announced, and wouldn't be disclosed until after they'd arrived at the first assembly area. Nothing was being taken for granted and 300 scoutships from the XXXIIInd and XIVth Deep Penetration Scout Groups were ordered to search for any enemy presence or activity that could pose a threat to the Battle Group's operation.

Admiral Tarel Costrand hadn't confided his plans to any of his captains, nor to his Squadron Commanders, since he knew that enemy Jerdens and their unholy creatures had infiltrated his Battle Group. It wouldn't surprise him if his most trusted officers were, in fact, Jerden agents, since nothing in this damned war was sacred. Despite this strong possibility of having been infiltrated, Admiral Costrand knew he had the most experienced and loyal officers and crews in the G.C.C.'s combined navies. They'd proven it over and over again during the long course of his naval career. They were clearly the most professional and aggressive men and

women he could possibly hope for, and he respected every one of them.

Only his personal steward and valet, Lieutenant Lester Hoskord, had his total trust, and this was only because of his special status. Hoskord, the feminine-looking young officer, was an Ansharim Magum and only the Admiral knew his true identity. The uncanny guesses and intuitions Tarel Costrand displayed, all too often, came from his special relationship with the Brotherhood and their powerful Magum with his infinite source of secret information. The old Admiral definitely had the edge over his allies and opponents alike.

* * *

Liesha Court leaned over the low couch and kissed Neftalak's ear, while caressing his bare chest with her soft slender hand.

"Don't you think it's time we retired to your bedroom, my dear? You know we Senior Commanders need a personal touch now and then."

"But, my lovely, I'm not sure I'm up to it," he murmured. "I'm not used to senior officers molesting my delicate little body. You might hurt me."

"Oh, I won't hurt you, my dear. Believe me, if I hurt you just one teensy-weensy bit, I'll stop right away. You don't have to be afraid."

"You will be gentle, won't you?"

"Oh, ever so gentle, my sweet," she kissed him again, caressing lower onto his stomach.

Neftalak loved this dark-skinned beauty from Cluson IV, in the Hekton Star Group. Her deep brown eyes were like her manners, soft and gentle. She was the only woman he really felt comfortable enough with to become intimately close. For some reason he didn't really understand, Neftalak lived an almost monastic life, working long hours and confining his social life to low-key group activities. Then Liesha came into his life five years ago and everything changed, he was in love.

Neftalak awoke feeling nervous and apprehensive. Only Liesha's soft breathing and the dull hum of ventilator fans broke the stillness of the dark room, but something was definitely wrong. The dull glow of the wall chronometer showed 03:03 hours and no

alarm lights appeared on the data plate below it. Still, something was wrong.

Moving cautiously, Neftalak got out of bed without awakening Liesha and donned his off-duty jumpsuit and boots. Then without thinking, he strapped on his laser pistol and left the room. There were no messages on his desk recorder and everything seemed to be in order. Not knowing why, he left the apartment and walked toward the ship's bridge deck, then changing his mind, turned into the corridor leading to Admiral Costrand's quarters.

Everything appeared normal until he approached the Admiral's suite, there weren't any guards in front of the double entry doors. Now that was odd!

Neftalak ignored all protocol and walked through the unlocked door where a tall man dressed in a security guard's uniform, turned and thrust a stun whip at his face. Instinctively, Neftalak ducked and countered with a smashing blow to the man's midsection. He'd always been lightning fast and was a seasoned fighter. Now his training paid off. Something about the man was wrong and Neftalak didn't wait to find out what. The flashing neuronic whip settled the matter. He dodged the weapon and chopped at the man's kidney, dropping him to his knees, and then finished him off with a kick to the small of his back. The man twisted, then jerked and fell over on his face. Then three men and a woman charged out of the Admiral's office and joined in the fight. For some reason they didn't use their laser pistols and Neftalak couldn't slow down enough to draw his own.

The fight was quick and silent. Neftalak spun and dodged his new opponents, tearing at them with every trick and maneuver he knew. One by one the three men fell to his onslaught, until only the woman was left facing him. Her nose was bleeding and she was doubled over from slashing blows he inflicted moments before, but her eyes showed only hatred. She sidestepped his attack and grabbed her laser pistol from its holster and tried to use it. He kicked her left leg out from under her, breaking her knee, and then kicked her in the throat before she could use the weapon.

Panting and trying to get his bearings, Neftalak pulled his pistol and stumbled into Admiral Costrand's office. Three lay bodies on the floor, one being Lieutenant Hoskord, the Admiral's valet. Moving cautiously through the door to the next room, he saw a body lying next to the bed. Without warning, something struck him

and sent him sprawling. As he hit the carpeted deck and spun around to protect himself, Neftalak's assailant struck out again knocking his pistol out of his hand. Things were happening so fast, he wasn't aware who or what was attacking him. The creature's movements were a blur and only his practiced reflexes saved Neftalak from being killed outright. He dodged and weaved, using furniture and anything at hand to defend himself, then there was a blinding flash and a short scream.

"What the hell was that?" Liesha gasped, her laser pistol held at ready. "I've never seen anything move so damned fast."

"You hit him . . . that's all that counts," Neftalak wheezed. "The son-of-a-bitch broke my arm."

Neftalak moved over to the Admiral's body and checked his pulse. "He's still alive. Sound the alarm and make sure those birds in the next room don't wake up."

"They won't, Neftalak. They're all dead except for Hoskord." Liesha spoke quickly as she checked the corpse on the floor. "The alarm's been disarmed and so have the comm-links. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Liesha left the room and headed for the nearest security alarm station. Neftalak checked the Admiral's condition, noting his neck was swollen and badly bruised. It would be a miracle if it wasn't broken. From Costrand's condition it was apparent that he'd put up a hell of a fight. Then he turned to the dead man lying on the deck.

"The security people are on their way," Liesha called through the door, "I've got to help Hoskord before he bleeds to death. God what a mess."

"Okay, but keep your gun handy. I'm not sure who're our people or enemy agents. This one's Sub-Captain Ralemaen from Internal Security. Those bastards out there are probably from his unit too."

"Oh shit. Now we've really got problems," she muttered, turning to help Lieutenant Hoskord who was regaining consciousness and beginning to move.

Four days in the hospital were more than Neftalak could stand. He was badly mauled by Admiral Costrand's assailants and suffered more than a broken arm. He'd collapsed two minutes after the fight was over. The security team found him lying next to the Admiral when they arrived on the scene. Liesha was in the office

tending to Lieutenant Hoskord and wasn't aware of his condition. Six hours in emergency surgery told the tale. Only good fortune and being in excellent condition saved his life, since Neftalak had been stabbed 14 times, two of the cuts missing vital organs by a fraction of a millimeter. The enemy's weapons were long, thin stilettos with barbed blades coated with an exotic narcotic. Because of his single-minded attack and adrenalin surging through his veins, Neftalak withstood the narcotic and wounds long enough to win the fight. If it hadn't been for Liesha, though, he'd have been killed by Sub-Captain Ralemaen.

Senior-Lieutenant Farben Rencoe of Internal Security interrogated Liesha Court the day before, after Admiral Costrand personally approved his credentials. No one in Internal Security was above suspicion and everyone had to pass a special psychological examination before being checked by the Admiral's valet, Lester Hoscord. Whoever this valet really was hadn't been disclosed, but apparently he was much more than he appeared. His eyes were strangely deep and something about them seemed to look right into Farben's very soul.

Liesha Court was another story. She was a Senior-Commander in Damage Control Section 135-D and a cool customer. She was one of those petite-appearing little women who was quiet and unassuming on the surface, but tough and resourceful in an emergency. How she killed Ralemaen with only one shot was amazing, considering the circumstances. Now that the full story of Commander B'Mesziah's ordeal had come to the surface, Farben Rencoe began to appreciate how tough and loyal the officers on this vessel were. If these two were an accurate sample of the rest, the Hollenborn was in good hands.

"Okay Commander B'Mesziah, I've got a good picture of what happened during the fight. You're damned lucky to come out of it alive. Those people were top-notch assassins. They were all armed with those coated daggers and other special weapons, apparently you caught'em completely by surprise."

"They left the door unlocked," Neftalak grinned, "that doesn't sound too bright to me."

"Well yes, but from our analysis of the situation, they were about to move the Admiral and had just unlocked the door. The fellow you encountered first apparently turned to give his associates the go-ahead when you walked in. The actual fight

between you and him lasted only about 10 or 15 seconds, and the others dropped what they were doing and came to his aid. You are a lot faster than you think, my friend. Believe it or not, you killed five top professionals in less than two minutes, and held your own against someone even faster than you. That's saying a lot. We corroborated our estimate of the time sequences with Senior-Commander Court. She followed you out of your quarters and never lost sight of you until you entered the Admiral's suite. It took her about two minutes to reach the suite and you were already in the bedroom by then."

"It's funny, Farben, but I don't remember seeing anyone attacking me in the bedroom, just a blur."

"Yeah, you were lucky to see that much. Ralemaen was wearing an advanced personal cloaking device. In fact, we haven't ever come across anything like it before. Unfortunately, Commander Court's laser short-circuited it and we have nothing left to analyze. Our technical people think it was equipped with a self-destruct charge, but that's only a guess."

"If that's what he had, then I can understand how he got to the security guards outside the Admiral's suite. They aren't exactly pushovers."

"Well, that about does it for me, Commander. I'll file your report and see what comes of it. By the way, the old man wants to see you and Commander Court as soon as you're out of bed. You aren't exactly unpopular in his circle or in my department, for that matter. We assume the enemy will infiltrate us, but not in our security hierarchy. You did us one big service."

After Senior-Lieutenant Rencoe left, Neftalak closed his eyes and tried to recount the affair again. He couldn't understand what awoke him and caused him go to the Admiral's suite in the first place. It wasn't an accident. Rencoe suspected it was a deep-seated form of intuition, for lack of a better definition, but the entire affair made Neftalak feel uneasy.

"Look here Neftalak, I feel like a fool being paraded in front of that Hoskord character," Liesha whispered. "There is something about him makes my skin crawl . . . not because he looks effeminate, but . . . I don't know."

"Did he do anything to you; touch you or something out of the ordinary?"

"No, nothing like that, I guess it's the way he looked at me. I felt undressed . . . naked."

"Well, at least he recognized a real woman, Liesha."

"I don't mean that way. I don't know what I mean . . . I just felt my skin crawling when he looked at me that way."

"I'll give him a good look-over . . ." Neftalak began.

"Commander B'Mesziah, please come with me." The Admiral's security guard spoke brusquely.

Neftalak followed the man into Admiral Costrand's office and came face-to-face with Lester Hoskord for the first time. The man's strangely soft, red eyes immediately raised the hackles on the back of his neck. He didn't like the man from the moment he saw him. It wasn't his girlish-looking face and slight frame, but his damned eyes.

"Please sit down, Commander B'Mesziah," the young man instructed.

Neftalak fought to control his emotions, wondering why the man's eyes bothered him. Then it dawned on him, Miriam! Yes, now he remembered her strange red eyes . . . but when and where he couldn't recall. His distaste and initial hostility quickly diminished and Lieutenant Hoskord suddenly became an important clue to his own past.

"So you recognize me as someone familiar, Commander. I've been hurt pretty badly, just as you were, but we'll both make it. Now back to your recognition of my similarity to someone from your past. Can you tell me who that person was?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about Lieutenant. . . ."

"No games, Commander B'Mesziah. We're in a lot of trouble and don't have time for games. Now please answer my question."

"I'm not sure I know the answer," Neftalak answered hesitantly. "It could be my imagination. Well . . . there was a Nashramh woman named Miriam who had eyes just like yours, or nearly so. I didn't like her because she seemed to look right through me and see all my insecurities. She was an ally, but I didn't know it at the time."

"When was that, Commander?"

"I don't know."

"It was before the Great Conflagration, Commander. Yes, it really happened and you knew Miriam B'Mesziah of the Nashramh Sisterhood, and she is your ally."

"Do you have some questions to ask me, Lieutenant? I'll tell you whatever I can."

"You already have, Commander. Now the Admiral will see you and Commander Court. We aren't letting anyone close to the Admiral who hasn't been screened and determined to be a true ally. You'll learn more from Admiral Costrand. Thank you."

Lieutenant Hoskord nodded as Neftalak stood up. The guard brought Liesha to the office and the two walked into the Admiral's bedroom.

"It's good to see you two," Costrand smiled from his bed. "Sorry, but I can't get up and shake your hands. My neck was broken in the fight and I'm in a cast."

Lieutenant Hoskord entered the room and closed the door behind him. Then, sitting on the corner of the bed, he waved them to two easy chairs.

"Please sit down and forget military protocol for the moment," Hoskord wheezed as he spoke. "We're going to discuss matters which are top-secret and not taken from this room. Do you understand?"

Both nodded their agreement and sat down.

"First of all," Hoskord wheezed, "you are not to disclose this attempted assassination ever took place. Your wounds are described in the ship's log as the result of an accident in the torpedo transfer tube you were inspecting. We don't want the enemy to know you were involved in thwarting their plan and taking vengeance on either of you. Senior-Lieutenant Esorah, of the torpedo handling section, has apprised us that he's taking steps to ensure that a similar accident doesn't happen again."

"We'll tell you this much," Admiral Costrand spoke, his voice seeming oddly high, "the enemy hasn't given up on whatever it is they've planned and they'll be back to find out what went wrong. We've known all along that they have large numbers of agents on this ship and spread throughout our command. What we don't know is why they want to capture me alive, and what they intend to do with me once I'm captured."

"That's about it," Hoskord added. "Since you two were involved in the affair, we want you to remain silent about what you know. In addition, we want you to continue with your normal functions as if nothing happened. If push comes to shove, we know we can count on you to serve loyally and effectively in the defense of this

ship. Your names are being placed on a special list of trusted officers to be notified in case of an extreme emergency. Until then, it's business as usual. Do you concur?"

"Yes I do," Liesha agreed.

"Yes, I agree," Neftalak added.

"Good. Commander B'Mesziah, you will be escorted back to the medical facility and kept under observation for another week until things smooth over. Commander Court, you will carry on with your normal duties and continue your friendship with Neftalak as if nothing happened, other than his accident. Most importantly, you are not to discuss this matter again, either between yourselves or with anyone else. The guard will escort you out. Thank you."

"And thank you both for performing like the professionals you are," Admiral Costrand spoke seriously. "You are dismissed."

After the door closed behind Neftalak and Liesha, Lieutenant Hoskord turned to the old Admiral.

"I can guarantee Commander B'Mesziah is 100 percent loyal to our cause. The Nashramh people tell me he's special to them, and that's saying a hell of a lot. I suspect our Senior-Commander Court is made of the same stuff."

"Yes, I agree," Costrand spoke thoughtfully. "Have you given any more thought to how B'Mesziah knew I was being attacked? His arriving on the scene when he did was no accident."

"I can only answer you in this respect, Admiral. There are powers and agencies on this vessel, belonging to a true ally, that have interfered with the enemy's plan. Commander B'Mesziah was directed here, but his actions after arriving were his own. When he saw your guards missing, he took the initiative and came in looking for a fight . . . and he was up to it."

"Powers and agencies belonging to an ally on this vessel, Is that what you said, Hoskord?"

"That's what I said, Admiral."

"These powers and agencies wouldn't be associated with the Necro-Classic Authority I've heard of, would they? I'm no mystic, but there is more to our being than meets the eye, just like the sub-binary."

"You're very astute, sir. What more can I say?"

"A hell of a lot, but you won't. Now we have to address the enemy's motives with respect to this attempted abduction. First, we have to find out why they chose to move now, while we're in the

sub-binary and withdrawing from the outer rim. Second, we have to discover where they were planning to hide my body, or how they intended to get me off this ship. There has to be something in the wind that we aren't aware of yet, but must figure on. The only thing that comes to mind is our ultimate destination. Possibly they want to attack us when we arrive."

"I doubt it, Admiral. They have other ways to find that out. No, it's got to be something we aren't aware of yet, but they can anticipate. It's obvious they don't know about our arrangement, or they'd have tried to capture me too."

"Are you sure they weren't trying to?"

"No. They had their knives out when they jumped me and from the looks in their eyes, they were trying to kill me."

"Your Necro-Classic Authority wouldn't be able to help us out would they?"

"What can I say?" Hoskord shrugged his shoulders. The old man hadn't lost his wit and would press every issue.

The two discussed their options for disguising their future operations and other matters of immediate concern. Senior-Captain Abcord Lind was covering for the Admiral during his absence. He went about his business on the ship's bridge as if nothing happened and acted as if the Admiral was just in the adjoining room. His actions were so natural and at ease, no one thought to question Admiral Costrand's dropping out of sight. If asked about it, Lind was instructed to state that the old man was working out strategic plans, as usual, and was in no mood to discuss anything with anyone. This, after all, was how Costrand usually worked.

* * *

There was a light knock on Neftalak's door. He hadn't been out of the hospital for more than an hour and was glad to be back in his own quarters. Setting his glass of chilled Vorol down, he walked slowly to the door and opened it.

"It's about time you came home, big boy!" Liesha pushed him into the room and closed the door behind her. "Don't I warrant a call, or am I just a piece of furniture? It's about time we had a little discussion about you leaving a nice warm bed and going out to inspect torpedo transfer tubes. Doesn't my voluptuous body interest you any more? What are you standing there all dressed

for? Do I have to get rough with you and hide your bottle of Vorol until you come across, eh?"

"My, my, what sharp little eyes you have, my dear. Here I am, a poor accident victim, just released from sick bay, and you want to have your way with me. Have you no decency, woman?"

"Cut the banter, big boy. You've got one horny woman on your hands. Now let's get moving or the bottle of Vorol gets confiscated."

"My god, I'd never have guessed my sweet little Liesha was so assertive."

"Yes, my dear, and I'm in love too."

Chapter 21

Recall

Nothing really changes in primitive rimworld societies, and it doesn't matter whether you're accused of being a god, witch, or communist . . . its all the same . . . you stand out as someone to be killed, tortured, or incarcerated. If you're lucky, your term of service is up, and you get to come home. . . .

17:30-18 DEMIN 1619-8N5

Springfield wasn't a big city, but Telly found it a good place to live a quiet life, at least until recently. The state of national politics, especially in the academic community, was deteriorating as the Senate's un-American investigations focused in on them. The chief witch-hunter, a Senator McCarthy, saw communists behind every bush and used his committee to ferret them out. Anyone could be accused, or put on a blacklist, because his lifestyle was different or he appeared to be too liberal. Once charged, the victim was considered guilty, regardless of the facts.

Telly had been accused of communist affiliations by a minister whom he'd never met. It didn't matter though, since he'd already received a message directing him to return home in three months. Leaving this turbulent world with its squabbling population was really good news. Oh, there were a lot of people whom he'd met over the years, for whom he felt a definite affinity. But the brutish social and political systems ruling this planet through fear and superstition, were a curse to the entire population. Now he was making arrangements for leaving Springfield and ensuring his movements weren't too suspicious.

Telly's apartment was two blocks from Sangamon State University, which had a decent anthropology department that enrolled students from their junior year through to a Master of Arts degree. He spent a lot time on the campus, attending lectures and using the library for his work.

During the last year, Telly befriended two children whose mother, Margaret McClusky, worked at the Marine Bank on First and Old State Capitol Plaza. Their apartment was down the hall from his. Twelve-year-old Daniel McClusky spent hours in Telly's apartment, listening to his classical records and drawing. Daniel's 14 year-old sister, Jennifer, who was obsessed with horses and related topics, also spent a lot of time in the apartment discussing her favorite subject. Telly's extensive knowledge of horses, the old west, and Mexico fascinated her. Other than talking and thinking about horses, Jennifer played the mandolin and sang cowboy songs.

The children were a real blessing to Telly's otherwise work-day existence, and their often spirited and opposing opinions gave him a brighter outlook on things. Cowboy songs and classical music didn't mix as far as they were concerned, nor did their other interests. The two rarely spoke to each other, and even barricaded their mother's kitchen table with Wheaties and Cornflakes boxes so they wouldn't have to look at each another during breakfast. The only time they were civil to one another was in Telly's presence, otherwise there was a constant fight.

Margaret McClusky invited Telly to their apartment for coffee when she heard he was leaving Springfield. Her husband, Ralph, was serving with the navy in Korea, and she appreciated the interest Telly took in her children, with respect to their education in music and history. Since Ralph was gone and she worked during the day, Telly's influence on the children seemed beneficial. She'd met him only a few times in the hall, when coming home from work, and at the laundromat where they did their laundry on Saturday mornings. Other than this, she really hadn't gotten to know him. However, he knew much more about Margaret and her children than even they did.

Knocking on the McCluskys' front door, Telly thought about the invitation. Mrs. McClusky knew he was leaving that evening, since he'd told the children about it earlier in the week. There was something about the tone of her voice when they met in the hall

yesterday, suggesting she had something else on her mind; possibly his being accused of being a communist by her church's minister. Just why this should matter now that he was leaving, was a mystery.

Jennifer opened the door, smiling, and invited him in.

"Gee, I wish you weren't leaving, Mr. Hartman," she blurted out, "I'll really miss you."

"I'll miss you too, Jennifer," he responded softly.

"Please come in and sit down, Mr. Hartman," Mrs. McClusky smiled, coldly, "Jennifer will pour you a cup of coffee."

Thank you, my dear. I'll sit over on this one," Telly smiled back, sitting down on a high-backed chair. "I've always preferred these wooden chairs." The wound he received during the First World War still bothered him and soft chairs weren't very comfortable. Now that he was getting old, cold weather compounded the problem making his limp more pronounced.

"So you're going to leave us and go home, Mr. Hartman," Margaret McClusky asked as she sat down on the couch. "Just where might home be?"

"Oh, it's a place you've never heard of, my dear. Anyway, I'll be leaving for Denver on the nine o'clock bus."

"Are you leaving because Reverend Heller accused you of being a communist?"

"Am I an anthropologist, yes, a communist, no. Reverend Heller, and his kind, is quick to accuse and slow to think. He isn't important enough to discuss further."

"Well, he said that an FBI check on you couldn't find where you'd ever attended a college or university, or you'd ever been employed anywhere as an anthropologist. In fact, he said they don't have any idea of who you are. You could have come from Mars for all they can find out."

Telly laughed and sipped at the cup of coffee Jennifer handed to him. "There you have it! We Martians do employ anthropologists to study you Earthlings and your domestic habits."

"I'm being serious Mr. Hartman. You've been telling my children all sorts of stories about the universities you've been at and things you've studied. They think you're some kind of superman and you're all they talk about. I want to know who and what you are, and what you've been saying to my children."

"My dear, do I perceive a bit of hostility in your tone? If so, I'll decline your hospitality and leave now. As to what I've said to your children, well, you can find the same facts in any library if you're inclined to do a great deal of research . . . say for your Doctorate."

Telly set his cup on the side table and started to rise.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hartman," Margaret spoke softly, "I don't mean to sound hostile. It's just that the FBI doesn't know who you are, and Reverend Heller thinks you're some sort of enemy agent. With all this talk about subversives and communists, a person has to be careful. I do have my children to think about."

Stopping and thinking for a moment, Telly sat down again and looked Mrs. McClusky straight in the eyes.

"Tell me young lady. Just where do you or this so-called Reverend Heller get off having the FBI make a criminal check on a private citizen? Have I given you or anyone else a reason to snoop into my private life?"

"It wasn't a criminal check, Mr. Hartman."

"Well then, just what was it? Do you know what the FBI is and what they do? Think about it. Just because an old man, who is a neighbor, encourages your children to excel in their studies and lends them classical records to listen to, you have the gall to accuse him of being a subversive. What do you suggest I do? Teach them to kill communists with guns and knives?"

"Mr. Hartman, I didn't accuse you of anything. I told Reverend Heller about the things you were discussing with my children, and he chose to call in the FBI. They told him you didn't work at Sangamon State University, and the personnel department there never heard of you. If I thought you were an enemy agent or someone who was bad, then I wouldn't have invited you into my apartment to talk. Actually, I wanted to thank you for the interest you've shown my children. And, yes I've been worried about the accusations against you, and I wanted to find out the truth for myself. You must understand, I worry about my kids."

Telly paused for a long moment before responding. "My dear Margaret McClusky, you are quick to accuse, just as your Reverend Heller is. Denying the fact and shifting the blame to that poor creature doesn't absolve you of your own responsibility."

Waving his hand to silence her answer, Telly continued. "I have been around this cruel world a long time, a lot longer than you have, my dear. I've seen innocent people falsely accused, tortured,

and then burned at the stake by superstitious bastards, using the name of their Lord as a rationale, and I've seen the Nazis accuse and destroy any and every intellectual who didn't agree with them; they too, called their enemies communists, among other things. Believe it or not, there are the same kinds of beasts in this country who'd condemn and murder anyone who seems different or doesn't agree with their narrow views."

"I'm sorry if I've accused you of anything, Mr. Hartman. I hadn't thought of it in that way and I really don't know why Reverend Heller called his friend at the FBI. You haven't actually said anything wrong to my children; in fact I've enjoyed their accounts of your conversations. It doesn't matter whether or not you teach at Sangamon State or anywhere else for that matter. I guess it's all this anticommunist controversy that's in the papers and on the radio all the time. You're right; there isn't any reason for an innocent person to be checked out by the police when he hasn't done anything wrong. I don't know what else to say other than I'm sorry, Mr. Hartman."

"Would you like another cup of coffee, Gerry?" Jennifer offered.

"No thanks, Jennifer."

"You said something just a moment ago about seeing people being tortured and burned at the stake, Mr. Hartman. When was that? Things like that don't happen any more."

"Long before you were born, my dear. As I said, I've been around here for a long time. Nothing has really changed much though. You were born during the year of 1917 while the restructuring of world power was taking place. There were millions of young men conscripted into vast armies to help settle affairs that none were remotely aware of. Before that there were wars to expand and consolidate national interests, and before that to ward off any threat to the established order of the Roman Church. Your own family was ostracized for leaving that church and fleeing to this country to escape persecution for their beliefs. At that time they were called anarchists and accused of all sorts of crimes against society. How do you think things have changed, other than we don't as yet have torture chambers and burning at the stake?"

Margaret leaned back on her couch and studied Telly's face for a long time before speaking. Something he'd said caught her attention and awakened old memories. She appeared puzzled by

his features, but wondered if it was just her imagination. And how did he know when she was born?

"Is there something bothering you, Margaret?" Telly spoke softly, studying her troubled expression.

"Yes, Mr. Hartman, there is something bothering me. When I was a little girl, my father had a very good friend who looked just like you. Yes, exactly like you. He was from France and had been wounded in the First World War, and I remember him singing old songs. His voice wasn't that good, but his songs intrigued my mother and me. I think his name was Mr. Reneau, yes, Gerald Reneau. I remember my mother saying that was his name . . . and he limped just like you. We were living in New York City then, when I was 12 years old. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were the same man, only with a different name. Are you the same man, Mr. Hartman?"

Picking up Jennifer's mandolin, Telly began by tuning it and then playing a few chords before saying anything.

"When I was younger, Margaret, we didn't have instruments exactly like this one, but I used to play a similar one. It was called a lute and was very popular all over Europe. I think Jennifer and Daniel will enjoy hearing some really old songs . . . the ones I used to sing."

Without hesitating, or waiting for a response, Telly started to strum the instrument and picked out an old tune that hadn't been heard on the earth for more than 300 years. Then, in the ancient language of Provence, he sang part of an epic poem known as the 'Song of Roland'. Neither Margaret nor her children understood the words, but they were definitely fascinated by them.

"That was popular back in 1310, and there were a number of different renditions. The one I sang has always been my favorite."

He then started singing in an old Gaelic tongue to a tune that was very familiar to the family.

"Hey, I know that tune, Gerry!" Daniel cried out.

Telly paused for a moment then continued, although he now sang the words in English.

"Alas my love you do me wrong,
To cast me off discourteously.
And I have loved you for so long,
Delighting in your company.
Greensleeves was all my joy,

Greensleeves was my delight.
Greensleeves was my heart of gold,
Oh, who but my lady Greensleeves."

"Now that should sound a little more familiar," Telly laughed.
"Would you like to hear some more of them?"

"You didn't answer my question, Mr. Hartman."

"Oh, but I did, my dear." Telly looked her straight in the eyes.
"Now I'm going to tell you a long story, and I'll accompany it with
some songs to punctuate it."

"I didn't hear you answer my question, Mr. Hartman. You just
sidestepped it."

"Listen to what I have to say, my dear, and you too, kids. I have
a great deal to relate about my experiences during the course of my
life, and many lessons which I want to share with you. Please be
patient, I assure you that I won't bore you with my account."

Telly leaned forward on his chair and continued to strum the
mandolin lightly as he spoke. He began by describing European
society during the 13th century, stressing the living standards of
the common people and illustrating his account with personality
sketches of actual people whom he'd known at the time. He spoke
so casually that neither Margaret nor the children realized he was
talking about himself. In fact, they became so engrossed in his
story it never occurred to them to question him about how he knew
so much about the countryside, villages, and individual people
from that far-off time.

"It's very easy to become bitter from the experience of seeing so
much suffering and tragedy everywhere you go, but then there are
the people, who are unique individuals, even if they appear the
same. As a society, with its cruelty, ignorance, poverty, and
superstition, I can't say much for this world; not even today's
supposed technological paradise we live in. But, of all the human
beings whom I've met and often befriended throughout the years, I
can't remember very many with whom I didn't feel an affinity.
There've been so many of them, in so many places. Yes, as
individuals the people of this world are good. Believe me, they're
well worth saving. As a society, there isn't one worth a damn that
I've ever come across . . . no, none."

"America's a wonderful society," Jennifer chimed in, "it's the
best country in the world."

"Yes, America is a decent country for the time being, but not for much longer, Jennifer. Cruelty, superstition, political intolerance, and violence are on the upswing and things will change. I've been watching it happen for a long time."

"Are you really a communist like Reverend Heller says?" Margaret asked, not liking what she was hearing. "The things you're saying about this country sound like it."

"Oh, I don't recall saying anything about Marxist-Leninist theory, or overthrowing the United States Government. Do you have any idea of what a communist is, or what he believes in?"

"I guess not, Mr. Hartman," Margaret flushed. "I'm not really well educated, and I took Reverend Heller's word without question. I guess you aren't one of them after all."

"No, I'm not a communist, nor anything else for that matter. Think about it, my dear, does not agreeing with the majority make someone a communist? If I'm not mistaken, it's in the communist-dominated countries that you're not allowed to be in disagreement with the government. This is the United States where we can believe anything we want to, isn't it? Tell me, what's wrong with a person wanting to be gainfully employed and living a peaceful life? Does being dark-skinned, or foreign born, or having unpopular ideas make a difference?"

"No! That's why America is good."

"So then, let's forget this foolishness about my being a communist or anarchist just because I don't agree with the establishment's view of things. This country has stood for the freedom of conscience, but now people are being called communists and subversives because they choose to disagree."

Strumming the mandolin, Telly sang several old tunes from before the Civil War, and then some more recent songs written by a man named Woody Guthrie. The songs told about how people, who had nothing, were exploited and cheated out of their own birthright by powerful interests that claimed to be somehow better than the general population. After finishing the last song, Telly spoke of people he'd met in France during the last century, then others in Mexico and the United States. Most of them were common people, migratory workers who picked fruit and vegetables, factory workers, miners, waiters and many others. They all had faces and names . . . they were real. There was something about the way Telly mixed folk tunes with his commentary, while strumming the

mandolin as he spoke, that enhanced the reality of his words. The men and women took on a new and living dimension, and their humble fates struck the McClusky family as something personal.

"Remember this, Jennifer, all people are essentially good. There are exceptions, but they aren't the majority. All of us get squirrelly when we're threatened or placed in a bad situation. When you, and other young people, set out into the world for the first time, you'll make some mistakes. That's what being young is about. When you're young, you see things as black or white. When you grow up and have experienced a lot of responsibility, then things will appear as different, but it'll only be you who's changed. Now, I bet you don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

"I don't know," Daniel shrugged.

"How about you, Jennifer?"

"Well, yes . . . sort of."

Why not look at it this way. You kids are a lot older and more experienced than a three-year-old baby, aren't you? If little Leonard, next door, plays around an electric wall socket, you know he's going to get hurt, but he may not believe you and continue to play with it. If he gets burned, it's easy for you to blame him for being foolish enough to get hurt in the first place. Isn't that right, Daniel?"

"I guess so," Daniel shrugged again.

"Did you ever stick a hairpin in a wall socket, Daniel?"

Daniel smiled and shrugged his shoulders again.

"Sure you did. So have a lot of other little kids, and they got their fingers burned too. Now that you're older and more experienced, you know better, but Leonard doesn't. You see, that's the way it is with all people. When we get older, we often forget that younger people do exactly what we did, but it seems to be different. Of course, that's because we know better from experience. This doesn't mean we have to make excuses for youngsters doing things wrong, but it does mean that we have to try and understand they are much like ourselves and aren't so bad."

"So, what are you getting at, Mr. Hartman?" Margaret asked.

"Well, don't we look at poor people who live in slums or underdeveloped countries as being something less than ourselves? They don't always have heated houses, inside plumbing, cars, or maybe electricity, and all the things we take for granted. So they don't appear to be, shall we say, as good as we are. But then, not

many years ago everyone in this country was in the same condition. We, either due to good fortune or because we're older, live in a better and more secure atmosphere than they do. We have books, schools, radios and all sorts of technological conveniences that they don't. But this doesn't make us more civilized. If we were to experience a famine or huge natural catastrophe, then many of us would resort to stealing and even murder to protect ourselves from starvation and privation. It's our conveniences that make it seem we're different from other people; but we aren't.

"When we look at another person's face or withered hands, we're seeing a dimension of ourselves in another setting. This is something each of us must understand if we're to grow and become truly civilized. We are, as the saying goes, 'our brother's keepers'. Our own riches are of no real value unless we share them in some way with our brothers and sisters on this world. I'm not talking about charity. Charity is only a stopgap measure, not an answer in itself. Feeding widows and orphaned children is no answer; giving them a good education and gainful employment is an answer. I don't mean dirty little jobs that pay nothing and rob them of their dignity, but rather the means to become like ourselves and self-sustaining with dignity. This goes not only for our immediate neighbors, but for everyone on this world. Until we understand this truth, none of us can ever become civilized or truly human."

"You mean like that little negro girl in my class," Jennifer asked, "the one who has a torn dress and can't read?"

"First of all, Jennifer, your little classmate does have a name doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is it?"

"Alisha Jones."

"Well now, Alisha Jones is a person, while little negro girl isn't. Alisha has a mother and father who have names and they laugh and cry just like you and I do. They like good food, want a nice home, and have dreams of what they would like to be in the future, just like everybody else; only their skin color and culture is different, but not them. Remember, we all hurt the same when we're hit or humiliated. We all try to get back when we've been attacked, and we all make mistakes that we're ashamed of. After

all, we're all trying to learn to become human and that's a hard thing to do."

The discussion went on for another two hours, as Telly explained how things appeared to be as opposed to how they really were. He showed them how putting labels like nigger, chink, or communist on people not only dehumanized them, but made it easier to oppress them. The labels didn't change anything; they only made it appear that there were differences.

"You see, individual people aren't the problem. It's the misplaced and warped values kept alive by cultural, religious, and political institutions that perpetrate most evils, although they profess to do otherwise. These are, in fact, really extensions of primitive tribal superstitions and practices that have been magnified and manipulated by modern shamans and their ambitious henchmen. You should always listen to what these modern shamans have to teach about religion, for it's through their views that they govern people."

"Is that really true, Mr. Hartman?" Margaret frowned. "I suspect you're calling Reverend Heller a modern shaman, and I don't know that I appreciate it."

"Call him and the others what you will, my dear, but it is through religion that they rule."

"I've never thought of it that way."

"There are new and inexperienced souls being born among us all the time, and they need more care and education to learn what we already know. If we deny them either, then they will become a thorn in our sides. It is because the world's population is growing so fast, and we're being overwhelmed by inexperienced and innocent souls, that it's being lost to a heartless, greedy and cruel minority, many of them posing as men of the cloth. I don't know what can be done to change things in the foreseeable future, but there are those of us who do care enough to try."

"You almost sound as if you're from another world, Mr. Hartman," Margaret smiled.

"I am."

Telly continued strumming the mandolin and began to sing an old Scottish song named Auld Lang Syne. After a few verses he changed from the original words and introduced stanzas in a language that had never been heard by natives on this world before; the Nashramh high dialect.

Margaret sat silently listening to the strange-sounding words, knowing she'd heard them before. Jennifer suddenly looked down at her hands as if she had never seen them before, and Daniel stood at attention. For a moment in time, they remembered who they were and then it occurred to each of them that Mr. Hartman was truly from another world.

Chapter 22

Offensive

The space between stars is so vast that trillions of moving objects regularly pass one another without much chance of collision . . . but, then there are exceptions. . . .

04:15-22 DEMIN 1619-8N5

The allied scout destroyers, TU9310 Corbol from the Ansharim Brotherhood and SD Qualo-Tae from the Nashramh Sisterhood, moved steadily up and through the first sub-binary plate into temporal space. They expected to encounter an incoming enemy convoy, laden with troops and war material, destined for Sargon's well-established bases on the galaxy's seventh-arm rim. Everyone aboard the warships was ready for the unexpected, and the two Magums, who'd been traded between the vessels, were in contact with one another and their respective Councils Central. Although the war between the Starset Galaxy's beleaguered defenders and the invading enemy had been raging for half a million years, Council Central knew it had only begun as far as the enemy was concerned.

The Galactic Common Confederation's once massive navies, totally outgunned and out-maneuvered for the past 2,000 years, were reduced to a fraction of their original numbers. Now they were forced to abandon the sixth and seventh-arm's rim space. Only Ansharim and Nashramh scout destroyers remained to confront the enemy's incoming fleets with harassing actions designed to disrupt his communications and supply network. Sweet Sargon's alien Legions of Light were building up their forward positions in

preparation for something bigger, but what it was, nobody knew. Possibly it was for a general fleet action that would overwhelm everything and everyone in front of it, or something else.

Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah sat behind, to the left of Captain Tod Roun's command chair as the Corbol broke into temporal space, 146 light years beyond the sixth-arm's trailing edge. She was amazed by the ease with which these Ansharim warships moved through the sub-binary plates and by the unbelievable accuracy of their navigational systems. She had to admit that they were a bit better than the Nashramh in this respect.

The Corbol's battle shields and cloaking screens were fully extended in case unwanted enemy vessels were in the breakout area and the ship was on full Red Alert with all weapons sections ready to fight at a moment's notice. This procedure was always practiced on Nashramh vessels, and, here too, the two navies operated alike. Hopefully, the enemy fleet would arrive on time and could be taken by surprise. The last three raids on enemy cargo carriers had gone badly, almost as if the incoming fleets were expecting them. The two cloaked scout destroyers were moving in closer to reduce their lapse time between sighting and attacking. This was risky, but absolutely necessary.

"We're crossing the energy flux barrier now," Captain Roun spoke out, as Arden Ardel's voice, from the Qualo-Tae, sounded the same words in her inner mind, at almost the exact moment.

BLAM! SCREEEEEEECH!

Everything exploded into violent crashing, screeching noise that overwhelmed Miriam's senses, as the Corbol shuddered and spun to the right and left on her vertical axis before the gyros caught and straightened her course. In a few short seconds it became apparent what had happened as the dense black surface of a giant enemy warship appeared on the bridge's forward gridscreen. The Corbol was skidding along the length of the black surface and everything below the gravity plate was being torn away by protrusions from the heavy metal hull. They had collided with a black raider!

Captain Roun clung to his controls and pulled the Corbol's bow up enough to disengage and arc away from the enemy battle cruiser. Dull thuds from explosions far astern, shook the damaged

ship and Miriam knew they were out of action. Only running for it could save them. Arden's voice had ceased a few moments after they hit against the enemy warship, and Miriam knew he'd been killed. The Qualo-Tae must have hit the enemy cruiser too, and had either been destroyed or badly hurt.

Damage reports flooded in from all over the ship, except for the laser, mine and torpedo sections. The deck below the gravity plate was completely torn away, exposing the interior of the vessel's magazines and weapons sections to the vacuum of space. Everyone there, was presumed dead. To compound their danger, the battle shields and cloaking screens disrupted and they were now an unarmed warship without any kind of defense. Their sub-binary drives and navigation systems were still intact, but for how long, no one knew. They had to run for it!

"I can't contact Ardel," Miriam notified the captain, "I think he's dead."

"Communications break radio silence and notify the Qualo-Tae of our status and advise them to run," Captain Roun nodded, then spoke tersely into his comm-link, "then shut everything down."

The SD Qualo-Tae was running parallel to the Corbol with a distance of only 10 kilometers between the vessels when she broke into temporal space. Then everything happened at once, and without warning they were fighting for their lives.

Brother-Magum Arden Ardel was sitting behind Sister-Captain Neferah B'Tziah and watching the forward grid-screen as the scout destroyer passed up and through the temporal energy flux barrier, and out into enemy-controlled space. Suddenly everything exploded and he felt an instant pain in his chest and on the right side of his face, then nothing. His senses cleared, after a moment, and he could see the ship's wrecked bridge with the starboard gridscreen blown away. He could do nothing now but watch, and try to organize himself to report this disaster to his Council Central, but that would take time, now that his corporeal body was dead. He wondered if Miriam had been killed aboard the Corbol. He couldn't communicate with her and had to settle for observing the two living members of the Qualo-Tae's bridge crew fight for their lives.

Sister-Captain Neferah B'Tziah yelled out to her Ansharim liaison to report their situation to Council Central immediately. She didn't realize Arden was dead, like her navigator and helm

technician. Her scout destroyer collided with an enemy battle cruiser a few seconds after entering temporal space, and now all hell was breaking loose. Damage reports were coming in from all over the ship, and she could see the enemy's dull black hull racing beneath her vessel as it shot along the cruiser's length.

"Dump all ordnance, now!" she barked into her comm-link, "we've collided with an enemy cruiser!"

Neferah realized that her right arm wasn't working and used her left to control her ship's wild gyrations. They'd hit the black raider at an oblique angle, on the Qualo-Tae's starboard side, and torn away part of her undercarriage and lower dish antenna. The starboard mine and torpedo sections were torn open, but the other weapons sections were now leaping into action.

The sharp machine gun-like snapping sounds of both torpedoes and mines being ejected from the port side and forward launchers were mingled with loud explosions inside the ship's pressure hull, making oral communications nearly impossible, even with comm-links. Neferah fought to keep her heading steady along the enemy vessel's axis, wondering if she was really going that slowly, since the long surface ahead of her seemed to go on forever. Then it dawned on her, this wasn't a 200 kilometer-long battle cruiser! It was one of Samael's giant battle wagons that measured over 1,200 kilometers and had enough firepower to destroy any planet in the galaxy!

"Hot damn, Arden," she yelled out, "tell Council Central we've run into one of their battle-ships!"

Not receiving a response, Neferah turned her head and saw Ardel was dead, his upper torso and head shredded by the exploding elements of the starboard gridscreen.

"Oh, shit!" she mumbled to herself. "Now we're really in trouble."

Bright flashes of exploding Mag-'T' warheads lit up the aft gridscreen as the Qualo-Tae shot past the stern of the enemy vessel. Neferah knew the terrible explosions, which could wipe out entire cities or allied warships, were only a nuisance to the giant battleship, and he'd soon begin his deadly pursuit. There was no way that a 600 meter-long scout destroyer could seriously damage one of these monsters, much less slow them down.

"Do we have sub-binary drive capability?" she barked into her comm-link.

"Affirmative," Commander Sharat's voice from the engineering section responded, "but not for long." Then, she filled Neferah in on the damage caused to the sub-binary drive systems.

"Drop into the first plate, now," Neferah ordered, "and report further damages immediately."

The remaining gridscreen darkened and then changed color as the wounded scout destroyer dropped into the first sub-binary plate. The process would take four hours providing the ship's power generators didn't detonate before then. Now it was time to find out the extent of their battle damage and determine their next moves.

Everything was happening so fast that Jenn didn't have a chance to get scared, or so she thought later. If she hadn't been strapped in when the Qualo-Tae collided with the enemy vessel, she'd have been killed instantly. As it was, her face was thrust to within a centimeter of her sub-band transceiver panel's main screen at the moment of impact, and then she was whipped around like a rag doll for a few moments as the ship skidded along the enemy's hull. Only her shoulder harness, with their bungee-spring retainer, kept her from being hurt. Now they were in a fight for their lives and everything counted, so Jenn concentrated on her sub-band transceiver's graphic display screens and audio output as if nothing else was happening.

During the first moments of the engagement, once the Qualo-Tae had been stabilized and her ordnance was being dumped, Jenn clearly heard the Corbol's unscrambled transmission telling them to run for it. For a brief second, Jenn wondered if Miriam had been hurt, but Binni B'Arb's voice in her comm-link, followed the transmission as she reported its contents to the captain. Then a jumble of mixed enemy messages sounded over the transceiver's multiple systems and she focused her attention on them.

Jenn shook her head to clear it, and then concentrated on the voices, some speaking in computer languages, reporting an increasing number of casualties and damage statistics. The Qualo-Tae's ordnance was causing confusion in the enemy's command center, since they interpreted the attack as coming from the Corbol, which they tracked as she pulled away and dropped into the sub-binary.

As the Qualo-Tae passed beyond the battleship's stern and began to drop down into the first sub-binary plate, an odd message

shot through the enemy's garbled battle reports and caught Jenn's attention. Her recording crystals caught the brief transmission which didn't appear to have come from the enemy ship, since it blasted over the hum of hundreds of voices.

"Are there any other enemy ships in this area, Valoah?" Jenn spoke into her comm-link.

"No. We haven't gotten any signals from anywhere other than the vessel we collided with."

"I've intercepted a coded signal that blasted over everything else, Valoah. It must have come from the sub-binary. Maybe the enemy's convoy is coming in, but I don't understand why they'd send that loud a signal."

Jenn ignored all other signals and concentrated on replaying the encoded transmission. It was an oral message, which sounded like it had been processed through a computer. Studying her digital readouts, graphic analysis screens, and listening carefully, while ignoring the loud explosions and dense smoke gathering inside her own ship, Jenn could make out definite Borg syllables. Yes, they were definitely in the Borg language, and despite the clever jumbling of oral and machine language, she began to understand what was being said.

"My god," she spoke aloud, "Kutulusargon is coming!"

Addressing her comm-link, Jenn notified the captain of her discovery, and speculated that the enemy vessel was probably sent on ahead to await their god's arrival with his escort fleet.

"You've got it, Jenn," Neferah shot back, "we've just run into a major fleet action. We've got to get the hell out of here and notify Council Central."

"Has something happened to Arden?" Jenn gasped.

"He bought it when we collided with that black bastard, kid. We've got to get the hell out of here."

The battle shields and cloaking screens were gone. The SRAN system short-circuited when they smashed against the enemy's hull, and their generators blew apart, nearly cutting the Qualo-Tae in half. Gunnel Haskoe and Mannie Brobit were killed by the initial blast and everybody in the medical section, just forward of the exploding generators, died shortly thereafter, because of sudden decompression. The two fighter-lifeboats were totally disabled by the explosion, since the SRAN generators were located between the port and starboard hangars. To compound the problem, the upper

dish antenna, which was directly overhead, was blown apart, and the lower dish was torn off by the enemy's hull.

Rodann Noch sat at her primary drive infuser-rod console, monitoring the final extraction sequence when the Qualo-Tae collided with the enemy warship. Now her central and starboard sub-binary drive units were surging and their cooling effluents climbed in temperature to within 10 points of critical. They couldn't have hit the black warship at a worse time, since the cooling effluents were at peak temperature and their primary heat exchangers ruptured. Now the entire engineering section was in danger of being engulfed in radioactive gases. Rodann hit the internal fan cutoff switches and activated the foam suppressant system to standby, in case there was a major leak.

Commander Sharat and Lulalah Croum rushed into the heat exchanger's damage control space and were now desperately trying to bypass the effluents to the undamaged port unit. Any one of the three units was designed to handle the entire load during an emergency, and this was just what the architects had in mind when they designed them. All the control valve remote actuators that engaged the automatic bypass systems failed, and they were forced to make the changes manually.

Manon Sharat's voice sounded over the comm-link, as Rodann adjusted the drives' circulating pumps to reduce line pressure to the bypass control valves.

"Bring'em back to five percent even if we pass critical," Manon instructed, "we're getting too much pressure on the valve faces to move them."

"We're at five percent now, boss," Rodann responded, "and they won't go any lower, unless I shut'em down and then bounce'em back once you've got the valves open."

"No. Don't. . . ."

The comm-link went dead just as a loud thump sounded on the deck below. Then there was a terrible screeching followed by another thump. A few moments later, Commander Sharat and Lulalah emerged from the ladder well and made for their control consoles. Their environmental uniforms were burned, and Lulalah's facemask and lens were discolored.

"What happened down there?" Rodann asked. "Did the damned thing blow?"

"No," Lulalah answered thickly, "all the piping was twisted around when we hit. The damned control valves were cocked to the side so we couldn't even get a wrench on them after we removed the hydraulic actuators. All that noise was the effluents shooting through the pinched pipes. We don't know how long they'll hold before they rupture. One bypass line blew just as we left the space, but that was on the backup unit. The lines are all twisted and bent and causing a hell of a lot of back pressure."

Commander Sharat was working at controlling the circulation pump's output pressure, while Lulalah kept manually adjusting the port side heat exchanger's remote controlled relief valve and monitored the temperature drop. She continued to inform Rodann of the problem as she worked until the commander's voice cut in.

"Affirmative, but not for long, one of the backup effluent bypass lines blew and the primary sub-binary circulation units aren't going to last long, Captain," Manon spoke loudly into her comm-link. "We can make it into the first plate for a few hours, but I can't guarantee for how long. That means our central and starboard drives will be completely out of operation in short order. It's going to take some jury-rigging to isolate the port side drive, but we can do it once we're able to stay in temporal space and shut the whole system down."

The captain's voice acknowledged her report and ordered her to drop into the sub-binary immediately.

"You heard the order, Rodann. Push them in."

Rodann activated the insert control motors, driving 40, ten-meter-long, catalytic 'Unicore' rods into the superheated core, creating the conversion process which restructured the ship's atomic configuration. Then computer synchronized alternators directed the real process of sub-binary propulsion, which was a complex and critical operation at best. The process of sub-binary injection to the first plate would take just over four hours. The reactor's cooling effluents dropped in temperature, but were still high, although within safe limits. There wasn't any use worrying about whether the computer synchronizing circuits were in perfect alignment, since they were running for their lives and would be blown to hell if it didn't head for the sub-binary now.

The Qualo-Tae shuddered again and again as corrosive chemical tanks and other volatile systems exploded in various

parts of the ship. The situation was desperate and no one knew if they'd make it through this fight.

* * *

Grand-Exalted-Commander Doromano Bouloure-vek studied the incoming damage reports, adjusting his view plate to accommodate the larger blast areas. Obviously the enemy intruder had entered temporal space inside his shields and unloaded 1,400 Magna-Therm warheads in a planned line along the Sargon's Righteousness' center-line. He then pulled away and dropped back into the sub-binary before leaving the extended battle shield. This was truly an extraordinary attack, and Doromano appreciated its obvious forethought and execution. The enemy's warheads had struck his communications antennas and 20 of them entered the aft fighter hangar, causing extensive damage to 6,000 fighter-craft housed there. The static field from the detonating Magna-Therm devices also jammed his short-range intruder detection system and disrupted his long-range sensors. It would take another three hours before these systems were put back into full operation. Until then, he would screen his vessel with 6,000 Expendo-Fighters from his forward hangar, keeping the remaining 18,000 fighters in reserve. Doromano doubted there would be a follow-up attack, although he knew the enemy ships were working in pairs in this area. Nonetheless, he would assume another attack was imminent, and draw back his shields to prevent their penetrating inside them again.

* * *

Bunnar Trenot and Hono Koun were rebuilding the bridge circuit controlling the port side Robel III drive unit when the Qualo-Tae settled into the first sub-binary plate. Commander Setah and Beasle Ulos were below them, in the reactor crossover chamber, setting up bypass piping making the drive independent of the central and starboard units. This wasn't a new or untested operation, but was a well-established emergency procedure. The overriding problem was that the actual crossover couldn't be made while the drives were in operation, thus they'd have to return to temporal space to finish the job.

Now the Qualo-Tae's engineering and propulsion sections were flooded with radioactive gases and the forward security hatches sealed to prevent contamination of the rest of the ship. The surviving engineering personnel hoped to live long enough to return to temporal space and finish the crossover before they died. But then, there was no guarantee. Thus, Rodann Noch, Jensole Saen and Nadar Rhemis were detailed to set up the automatic reentry mechanism, known as the 'Dead Tiller', so the ship would surface to temporal space, on an automatic seven-hour sequence, once the rod-drive motors were activated to withdraw. Hopefully everything would be set up for the crossover and the Dead Tiller would then take them back down through the seven sub-binary plates and bring them back up when they reached their destination. More than one ship, in which the crew had all died, made it back to Nashramh custody by using this mechanism. The Dead Tiller was their last-ditch effort to save a dead ship from being lost out in the void. The 'deadman' mechanism would also be set on remote, just in case intruders got aboard.

Violann Trest finished her run-through of the damaged starboard fighter-lifeboat's sub-binary drive power circuit. Everything appeared to be working properly and the remote actuator should work once the trigger pin was pulled. It was important that the Qualo-Tae be at least a 100,000 kilometers away from the fighter-lifeboat when the remote actuator engaged the sub-binary drive. The explosion would be magnified by the first sub-binary plate's alien environment, and there wouldn't be a second chance of getting away in one piece. Distance was the primary factor here.

Croamer Orr and Inot Brem worked together to extract the fighter-lifeboat from the tangle of cables and metal tubing wound around everything in the starboard hangar when the SRAN generators and their power transformers exploded behind the longitudinal bulkhead. The hangar's overhead hatch was blown off, and the lower structure was shredded and twisted away from the damaged fighter-lifeboat. The escape craft was a wreck, and its sub-binary drives would disrupt if engaged. Thus, the craft had to be ejected as soon as possible to prevent an accident, and used as a decoy to distract the enemy from the Qualo-Tae's real intent. Arline Ness was clearly visible on the lower section of the hangar where she was unhooking the last grapple, holding the escape craft

in place. Her white EVA uniform was easily seen against the pitch black of the void behind her.

"Okay Violann, get the hell out of there," Croamer spoke sharply into her comm-link, "and pull the pin, now."

"Pin's pulled and the timer's activated, Croamer. I'm on my way."

Violann's EVA uniform appeared below, as she emerged from an emergency hatch, not more than 10 meters from Arline Ness. The two signaled to Croamer and moved away from the craft. Croamer pressed a red actuator button on her EVA uniform's wrist, and a small rocket motor silently pushed the fighter-lifeboat away from the Qualo-Tae. The four security women made their way into the dark medical section which was forward of the hangar area, and closed the barrier hatch behind them.

"The fighter-lifeboat has been released and is clear of us, Captain. You can take her out now."

Three minutes after the Qualo-Tae broke into temporal space, her sub-binary drives were shut down and the process of deactivating all auxiliary equipment throughout the ship was completed. Once the sub-binaries were deactivated, the gravity plate was cancelled out and everything was in zero gravity. Only the separately powered gyros kept the Qualo-Tae from tumbling.

Manon Sharat and Lulalah Croum died an hour earlier, and Hono Koun was near collapse from fatigue and radiation poisoning. The four remaining engineers were dying and it was nearly impossible for them to function effectively. They directed their efforts toward shutting down nonessential systems and moving their dead comrades' bodies, and themselves to the port side security hatch to die. This way, their sisters wouldn't be exposed to an overdose of radiation while trying to retrieve their bodies. Otherwise, all arrangements were completed for crossing over the control circuits and piping systems to isolate the port side sub-binary drive. It would take slightly over three hours if the security section's replacement crew didn't encounter serious problems.

Captain B'Tziah gave the go-ahead for her first officer, Merced Jorgar and four security sisters; Violann Trest, Inot Brem, Arline Ness, and Jensole Saen to enter the hot area and make the crossover. She expressly forbade her security chief, Croamer Orr, from accompanying them since the Commander was her own replacement in case of her death. There was no question that

Neferah's right arm was going to be cut off as soon as things were stabilized on the ship. The medical section had been destroyed while the rest of the ship's atmosphere was permeated with caustic and poisonous gases, and no surgery could be undertaken now.

Commander Jorgar and her four security technicians had already entered the radioactive engineering section and removed the dead and dying engineers' bodies to the port side hangar's airlock. Then they returned and made for the sub-binary drive unit in the port side propulsion section where they began connecting and testing the crossover controls and effluent piping.

Jensole Saen, who was the last to enter the engineering section, closed and secured the security hatch before continuing. She and her sisters were now doomed to die in this contaminated atmosphere, since they had to complete the crossover, test and verify the system, then operate and supervise the control rod-insertion through the seven sub-binary plate levels. After they reached the seventh plate, 15 hours later, they had to reset the Dead Tiller to bring the Qualo-Tae back up through the sub-binary plates and into temporal space in 18 months. Although the Dead Tiller was designed to take the vessel down through the seven plates, and back up again, they couldn't trust it to function correctly with only one drive, especially if there were adjustments to be made in the process. If the Dead Tiller's automatic sequencer didn't perform parallel to their supervised operations, then another crew of five women would enter the compartment at the end of the voyage and manually operate the controls. Now time was of essence as the team went to work making their vital connections.

Jenn began her difficult task by retrieving the dead and dying engineers from the port side airlock and removing them to a larger pressurized space inside the medical section. Vasim Batoun and Lubin Abinso, from security, helped her with this move, and the medical technicians worked to comfort their dying sisters.

When Merced Jorgar and her four companions were detailed to connect the crossovers to the sub-binary drive, and each of the other survivors were detailed to prepare the port side fighter-lifeboat for immediate occupancy, Jenn made her decision.

"Captain," she spoke firmly, "I haven't been trained to work on any of the ship's operating systems, so I'll take care of retrieving our dead and wounded."

Neferah studied her for a moment, then said, "I agree, Jenn. Start with our engineers in the port side airlock and move them to a larger compartment. There should be some pressurized spaces we can keep clean for a while; Croamer will detail two med-techs to accompany you and to comfort those who're dying. There are three up on the bridge, but you can get them last. We don't know where any of the others are, so you'll have to search every section until you locate them."

From that moment on, Jenn was on-her-own. She donned an EVA suit over her environmental uniform, and once it was pressurized, started her lonely and gruesome job.

* * *

Grand-Exalted-Commander Doromano Bouloure-vek had a fairly good idea of what happened to the enemy ship. Fifteen of his Expendo-Fighters were sent down to the first sub-spec plateau to investigate a massive disturbance that registered on his sub-spec transmission beam. Apparently the vessel suffered serious damage and had to be scuttled shortly after entering the first plateau. There was a definite track leading away from the ionic cloud, left by the implosion, leading out of the plateau. This he considered to be one of the enemy's lifeboats escaping deeper into the sub-spec, and knowing they had advanced Robel drives which were faster than his own pursuit vessels, Bouloure-vek recalled his fighters. His combat countermeasure and long-range detectors were still malfunctioning due to magnetic and radioactive damage from the enemy's Magna-Therm warheads. The warheads were designed after Sweet Sargon's own ordnance and, although small, were of superior quality. Thus, they inflicted considerable damage to the battleship's external antennas and sensing equipment through both blast effects and magnetic flux that disrupted all electromagnetic wavelengths. It would take ten hours, possibly longer, to complete the process of countering the damage, and until then, he would have to trust his fighter screen to detect any incoming vessels.

The Qualo-Tae, now in temporal space, had shut down her sub-binary drives and was running on her Class-C impulse drives. She was a small vessel and didn't have any electronic equipment operating to attract undue attention, so she slipped, unseen,

through Sargon's Righteousness' damaged probe systems and his roving fighter screens.

* * *

Jenn retrieved 10 more of her dead sisters and was having difficulty finding others in the darkness and dense, heavy smoke that permeated the pressurized section of the ship. The last one she discovered was Chief-Gunner Unar Setah, who was crushed by a laser generator, smashed in during the initial collision. At first, she didn't recognize Unar, but Neff, who kept fluttering around in her mind's eye, knew instantly who the woman was.

"Oh my, oh my, how terrible," Neff kept repeating. "This is Unar, oh my, how terrible!"

Neff knew who all the corpses belonged to since she could recognize their souls contained in their survival crystals. Without Neff and her constant dialogue, Jenn would have been overcome by the terrible sights she encountered. Some of the women were dismembered, crushed, burned beyond recognition, and exploded from internal pressure when the med-section decompressed. These were all women whom Jenn had known and loved as friends and sisters, and now to see them so terribly disfigured nearly broke her heart. But still she poked and prodded every nook and cranny to find each of them. She had her duty and she was determined to finish what she'd started.

Inside her pressure helmet, Jenn's nose was running, causing it to tickle, nearly driving her to distraction. The more she thought about it, the worse it got and the state of her nerves probably accelerated it.

"Oh, damn," she mumbled to herself, "they've had these stupid helmets for thousands of years and nobody has ever thought to make a nose-wiper. If I live through this, I'm going to invent one." She continued to discuss the subject on and on with Neff as she doggedly searched through the dark, smoke-filled ship.

The crossover process went smoothly, since Manon Sharat and her engineers did a thorough job of setting up the control circuits and complex piping runs for final connections. The navigational computer was synchronized with the drive unit and all data verified. Merced Jorgar notified Captain B'Tziah of their status and was given permission to charge the sub-binary drive and drop out

of temporal space. Once the ship altered her atomic structure, and all operating systems were verified to be working correctly, the survivors returned to their jobs.

Jenn entered the upper bridge and found Chochel H'Goar, Rhiah Bosse, and Arden Ardel, all strapped in their chairs where they'd died. Suddenly Neff began to flutter around crying to herself.

"What's the matter, Neff?" Jenn spoke out loud.

"He's not here! Oh my, he's not here!" she repeated over and over.

"What do you mean, Neff?"

"Arden's not here!" she cried out, "he's not in his survival chip!"

Jenn didn't know what to think. There had to be some sort of explanation, but she couldn't think of any.

"Are you sure he's not there, Neff? After all, he is a Magum and can't just get lost when he has a survival chip to enter. Maybe he's asleep."

"Oh no, he isn't there, Jenn. Chochel and Rhiah are in their survival chips, but he isn't. Oh, this is terrible!"

"I don't know, Neff, maybe he's with Miriam. He could have gone over to Miriam if that's possible."

"Oh yes. Oh yes indeed, that's it," Neff chirped. "Miriam knows where he is, oh yes, Miriam knows where he is."

Not knowing what else to do, Jenn unstrapped the three corpses and tied them together with a plastic strap. Then, she carefully guided them through the long, smoke-filled, central passage-way and back to the med-section where the other bodies were lined up and covered with plasti-nap sheets. There were a total of 18 dead, and soon the five women working in the main propulsion section would be joining them. Jenn felt a certain sense of resignation to the reality of her situation, since nothing could be done to reverse things. These had been living, breathing human beings only a few short hours ago, and now they were only visible memories of those vibrant human personalities. It took everything she had to keep from bursting into tears.

Now that all of the dead were gathered together and accounted for, Jenn removed the Necro-Classic Crystal case; Commander Orr had given her, from her EVA uniform's side pocket. There was a long tweezers-like instrument for inserting into a person's mouth and removing their survival chip from a back molar. She removed the facemask of each woman, some which had literally been melted

onto their flesh, and began the slow process of removing each survival chip and placing it in a numbered slot inside the open metal case. Once all 17 of the women's crystals were installed into the numbered slots and accounted for, Jenn removed Arden's from his nearly demolished mouth and head. If she hadn't known him personally, she'd never have recognized that this was Brother-Magum Arden Ardel. The tiny chip was a dull red, and Jenn realized Neff was right, there wasn't anyone inside it."

"Oh Neff, I'm really worried. I don't understand this. If Arden isn't in the chip or with Miriam, where can he be?"

"Oh my, where can he be? Where can he be?" Neff echoed frantically.

They were moving along the seventh sub-binary plate and the port side Robel III drive unit that was operating smoothly. Merced Jorgar and her four security technicians died shortly after reaching the seventh plate, but not before resetting the Dead Tiller to bring the Qualo-Tae back up to temporal space in 16,401 hours, or just over 18 months. Jenn retrieved their bodies and placed their survival chips in her Necro-Classic Crystal case. There were a total of 23 dead, and nine wounded, out of a complement of 37 officers and technicians. This left only 14 of them alive.

The port side fighter-lifeboat's gravity plate was activated and her atmospheric integrity secured so the 14 survivors would have safe quarters to live in during the voyage. The interior of the Qualo-Tae was without gravity and her atmospheric gases were clouded with toxic and corrosive fumes. The port side Robel drive provided only a gravity plate for the propulsion and engineering sections which were radioactive, so only the fighter-lifeboat provided safe quarters.

Lubin Abinso, one of the four security medical technicians, performed surgery on Neferah's right arm, removing it just below the shoulder. The flesh below the elbow was eaten away by corrosive elements let loose in the ship's atmosphere, and a tightly knotted tourniquet around her environmental uniform's sleeve, just above the elbow, had prevented the material from going any higher.

Neferah was under a heavy sedative and would be out of action for several days. No one wanted her to wake up and start overdoing it. They needed her alive and well, so she was kept sedated until it was deemed safe to let her wake up.

His vision had cleared as Arden saw the activity in the fighter-lifeboat through new eyes, although this didn't really interest him. He had a job to do, and that came first. Focusing his composite mind, Arden spoke to Miriam on the Corbol, and through her to the Nashramh's Council Central. He notified Ruby of the situation on the Qualo-Tae and of the fact that Kutulusargon was arriving, or had already arrived in the Starset Galaxy. Ruby, in turn, advised him to attach himself to his hostess' gamma-complex, without disclosing his presence, and to remain passive during the remainder of the voyage. This, he concurred with and instructed his little faery friends to be calm and not to disturb their hostess while he slept. They all agreed happily and assured him that they would be ever so quiet. He then attached himself to the gamma-complex and became passive.

Jenn had taken it upon herself to watch over Neferah while she was asleep, so the others would have more time to maintain the escape craft's life-support machinery. Nothing on a spaceship is totally automatic, and there is a continuous program of preventive maintenance and internal cleaning going on at all times, and this situation didn't change anything. Taking care of Neferah reminded her of happier times, and made Jenn feel better about the present situation. What was going to happen next was anyone's guess.

It was during her long vigil when Jenn noticed that Neff was becoming overly active as the little faery's shadow kept fluttering back and forth across her mind's eye. At first, Jenn ignored her little friend's wild fluttering, then it occurred to her that it wasn't just Neff bouncing around, but another, no, three other faeries were with her.

"My god!" she exclaimed to herself, "where did you little nitwits come from?"

The little creatures continued on with their happy encounter and ignored her. After all, they weren't supposed to bother their hostess. Then it dawned on her, these were Arden's little friends, which meant that he must be with them, but where?

"Of course," she muttered to herself, "he's in my head, but I can't see him. That has to be it!"

Jenn got Croamer Orr aside and told her about what she suspected. Croamer nodded, and suggested she keep the information to herself, since the knowledge wouldn't really help their crew.

"There's a possibility," Croamer spoke softly, "that he's using you as a transmitter to Council Central. If they know about Kutulusargon's arrival in our galaxy, it's all well and good. But, we have to keep it to ourselves for the time being. Our people need all the incentives possible to want to survive this ordeal alive, and their duty to report Sargon's arrival is the best reason to do so."

Jenn nodded and agreed with Commander Orr. She also knew the Necro-Classic operations of her order were best kept secret.

Neferah sat up in her cot and watched as Carno Rae changed the dressings on her severed upper arm. The wound was healing correctly, although Carno was concerned that there might be some drainage and whether the sutures were holding.

"Well, Carno, how's it look, did Lubin use a hatchet to take it off, or what?"

"We couldn't find a hatchet, Captain, but a sharp knife and a circular saw did the job. Not fancy, but a good job under the circumstances."

Looking over at Jenn, Neferah glowered and wondered what the little elf looked so prim about.

"Why the dumb grin on your chops, Jenn? Are you into some kind of elf humor, or what?"

"Oh, nothing at all, Neferah, I just have a lot of good memories to think about. Things could be worse, you know."

"Hoo-ha, an optimist in our midst, Jenn, you have got to be one of a kind. I don't think I could cope with an entire planet full of happy little elves. Gad!"

"Is our captain in one of her usual nasty moods?" Valoah poked her head around the compartment's hatch. "I could swear I heard her ever so inspiring tones ringing through the ship."

Neferah glared at the new intruder and decided to keep her mouth shut. She wasn't feeling well enough for a knock-down drag-out fight right now, but would take up the matter later.

"Ah, I can see a new grudge forming in our captain's ever alert mind. Gives you a good reason to live, hey? At least long enough to get even." Valoah was glad to see the boss feeling better. Her nasty mood indicated she was on the mend, and that was good news.

Carno applied a new wrapping to Neferah's wound and tried to ignore the infighting. She wasn't going to touch this one with a 10 meter-long pole. Neferah and her officers had been bickering and fighting among themselves for as long as she could remember.

Surprisingly, nobody had gotten it in their heads to shoot anyone yet. But, with this bunch, you could never tell.

"Well, what do you want, scuzball?"

"Oh, I just thought you might be interested in our present status, or are you still on vacation?"

"Cut the crap and shoot."

Valoah ignored the last comment and related the entire status of the ship, omitting nothing.

"We got away clean, Neferah. I suspect our ordnance screwed up the enemy's long-range sensors, possibly with residual electromagnetic flux from our Mag-'T' warheads. My aft screen crystals show 1,401 Mag-'T' signatures, and 45 secondary explosions, one of which appeared to come from an open hangar. All in all, our effect on the battleship was superficial, but still caused him to lose some of his clout long enough for us to get away without being chased."

"Fourteen hundred and one signatures, hey, I don't doubt we caused him to lose a little sleep."

"Who knows about those bastards, Neferah, at least we'll be able to report Kutulusargon's arrival. Your little friend here is one sharp cookie when it comes to figuring out his codes and damned gutsy too. She got all our casualties out and accounted for, while we were tied up with damage control and getting the ship into the sub-binary."

"I know. Jenn's a hell of a lot more than a little elf with a silly grin on her chops, right Jenn?" Neferah raised her left hand and gave Jenn an affectionate tap.

"I'd rather be a silly elf."

"That's telling her kid."

"I'll get you later, scuzball."

The air in the fighter-lifeboat's cramped quarters was thick with gloom as everyone kept busy with their tasks. The main ship was totally uninhabitable, so living was confined to the escape craft. There wasn't any shortage of provisions, only space and things to do other than work.

Jenn made her mind up. This doom and gloom wasn't going to last forever! No, she'd have to do something about it. A long time ago, Miriam told her that singing was the best means of getting rid of depression, and she'd sung to the survivors of the SD Whisper-Lal back during the Great Conflagration, so she'd do it here.

Plopping herself down in the middle of the main living space, Jenn started to sing some of the old camp songs she learned as a little kid. The other crew members tried to ignore her, so she began prodding each one and making them join her in singing the songs. She was so insistent that one by one, the other women began to hum along with her, and even to join in. It was no easy task to get these tough and brusque characters to sing little kid's songs, but Jenn was tireless in her efforts. Finally, the air began to lighten and there were regular periods for group singing scheduled so everyone had a chance to take part, all except for Neferah who told Jenn where to stuff it.

"Come on, Neferah," Jenn prodded, "I can remember when you used to like singing back at Ling Wall."

"Aw shit, Jenn, that was a million years ago. How the hell do you remember all that crap anyway?"

"Hey, the boss used to like singing," Binni B'Arb yelled out, "let's take a vote and see how many want her to join in."

"This isn't a democracy, pimple head," Neferah shot back.

Everyone echoed Binni's suggestion and a vote was taken, 12 for and one against.

"The 'for's' have it," Binni laughed. You're now officially one of our Qualo-Tae's glee club, boss."

"I'll be dipped in Creach dung before I get involved in your childish pastimes."

"Hey, somebody get some Creach dung, we're going to have a dipping party."

"Can it, B'Arb! Your scroungy life's on a knife's edge."

"Aw, come on, Neferah," Jenn interceded, "you're not afraid to sing a few songs are you?"

"I'm not afraid of anything, alive or otherwise."

"Yellow-belly talk," Valoah laughed, "all talk and no action."

"Come on, Neferah, Just give it a try."

"Oh shit, you win, Jenn. I'll join in just to keep the peace. This whole damned thing is getting out of hand."

Neferah reluctantly joined in gradually relinquishing her reservations and actually enjoying the sing-alongs. Thus, the remainder of the long voyage was considerably lightened.

Chapter 23

Leaving

Even out on the rim's primitive assignments, we find that our galaxy is indeed small . . . there's always a friend we've met before, or someone associated with our past. . . .

10:05-07 MAREN 1619-8N5

Telly looked through the Plexiglas window and down over the broad body of deep blue water, which he noted from his map book was called Puget Sound. A few minutes earlier the aircraft passed over two major lakes, one which was more than 10 miles long with a large island in the middle. There were bridges on both the northeastern and northwestern sides of the island linking it with the mainland. To the west of the long lake was Seattle, a port city bordering Puget Sound, and a deep water port called Elliot Bay. From 900 feet, the small city was beautiful, with large green areas and broad belts of blue water on each side. The city itself was located between two ranges of white-capped mountains which were also to the east and west of it, and far to the south lay a dormant volcano named Mount Rainier.

The aircraft circled and began its descent to Boeing Field now clearly visible at the southern end of the city, while another airport could be seen further to the southwest. The air was bumpy as the two-engine airplane made its final approach and dropped swiftly to the grey-white pavement.

Once on the ground, the airplane taxied over to a small passenger terminal located at the east side of the field and came to a stop. The pilot revved the engines one at a time then shut them

down. This was the last leg of his trip and Telly was tired, far more so than when he left Springfield three months ago. His last stop at Spokane had been pleasant enough, although the train ride from Denver was better, since the scenery was beautiful and the various stops and train changes gave him a chance to study the western part of this great country. As primitive as these rough-hewn Americans were, he preferred them to all of the other nationalities he'd encountered over the past 700 years. It was obvious that their pluralistic society, with its greater realms of personal choice was to be short-lived, but he still liked them. The flight on the Western Airlines craft had been bumpy, especially over the Cascade Mountains, but the view was worth the trouble.

After collecting his suitcases at the airline's baggage counter, Telly walked outside into the cool damp air. There were several cabs stationed in front of the terminal and he made for the nearest, which was yellow as its name printed on the side stated.

"Where to, mister," the driver asked. He unfolded from his driver's seat, and reached for Telly's bags. "Here, I'll put these in the trunk for you."

"Thanks," Telly smiled broadly, "I'm going over to 42nd and University Way Northeast. Just drop me off at the corner when we get there. By the way, how did the Rainier's do last night?"

"Crummy," the driver shook his head, "they were all thumbs."

"Ah well, that's how the old game goes," Telly laughed. "You know, I met Emil Sick when he was just a kid, and if I recall, he was into beer and baseball even then."

The driver laughed and the two talked about sports and the beer business until they reached the University District at the north end of town. Telly had never met Emil Sick, nor was he in the slightest bit interested in sports, but the subject always disarmed any prying suspicions, especially with the recent scare about communists. As for Sick, he'd read about the popular owner of the Rainier's baseball team in old copies of the Seattle Times and Post Intelligencer before leaving on his circuitous trip. The driver drove to the east part of the city past Sick's Stadium and north along East 23rd, down a long hill to the Montlake bridge, and over to University Way.

"Which corner do you want to get out at?"

"Over there across the street, on that corner." Telly answered, pointing to the southwest corner, "That ought to do it."

After paying the cab driver and collecting his bags, Telly turned and walked east to a small bookstore next to an alley in the middle of the block. There was an old cat sitting behind the window to the right of the door, and he stopped and petted it as he entered. A tall young man with thick glasses was behind a high counter and he looked up as Telly set his bags down.

"Can I help you?"

"Sure," Telly smiled, "you're Ed aren't you? I'm Gerry Hartman and I'm here to see our world famous witch. Just tell her it's her old warlock lover who's come to carry her away to Agar�hi."

"Oh yes, I've heard about you. She said you were going to be dropping by and to let her know when you got here. She's out for a few minutes, why don't you come in back and sit down?" Ed stepped around the counter and picked up Telly's bags and led the way to a makeshift office at the back of the store.

"You don't mind if I bring your cat along?" Telly asked as he picked the fat creature up.

"Sure, go right ahead, he likes everybody," Ed spoke over his shoulder. "He's not just a cat though, he's a familiar."

"True, true," Telly smiled thinking that the old woman probably had everyone believing she really was a witch, so why not?

In the back of the store there was a tiny desk with an old typewriter on it and piles of paper, dishes, cups, books and newspapers heaped on and around it.

"You can sit back here in Ulsa's office, Gerry, and I'll get you a cup of coffee."

"That would be great," Telly answered, noting the jumble of odds and ends heaped all over the place.

"Ulsa types out people's term papers and dissertations for them," Ed waved towards several different piles of papers. "She edits the papers for them and I suspect she even writes them for a price. Believe it or not, she doesn't check for references, but just relies on her memory which is something like a steel trap. Don't get in an argument with her or you'll either lose or get a hex placed on you."

Smiling, Ed went to the front of the store for a cup of coffee while Telly sat down with the old cat in his lap.

Ulsa Rubenel returned to her bookstore with a bag filled with sandwiches and cat food. Ed was talking to a young woman at the counter and as she entered, he stopped and waved to her.

"Ulsa, you have a guest waiting for you," he smiled, "an old warlock who says he's going to carry you off to Agartha."

"Oh, really," Ulsa replied as she peered toward the back of the store.

"Yes, it's Gerry Hartman and he's sitting in the back with Graumaulkin."

Ulsa nodded to Ed, and then walked back to her desk where Telly was reading a Popular Mechanics magazine.

"So you've come to carry me off to Agartha," she wheezed, "and pray tell, do you have any idea of where that is?"

Telly looked up and without smiling replied, "It's a city much like Shambhala wherein our common enemy resides hidden, in a vile place called Kalapa where it is said that Tiamat still rules in the name of her lord, far under the mountains of Tibet. And, verily yes, I do know the location of that most secret of places wherein the nine Colmer Masters of the Legion of Light make their headquarters."

"Some say that it lies in the Gobi desert, on a mountain top to the north of Tibet, but cannot be reached by land. Is this so, or am I misinformed?"

"Wherein an island is the top of a high mountain and can't be reached by land, you are correct, but otherwise, no."

"Then your name must be Telakin B'Mesziah, I believe," she said, setting down the brown paper sack and replacing her fiber-laser in its hidden holster.

"Yes I am," Telly nodded, "and I have instructions to report to you for processing. Is that young man at the front counter one of your people?"

"No, but he minds his own business and so does the girl he's talking to. They're employees of mine and I know much about each of them."

The two talked for a short time before Ulsa suggested he take his bags to her apartment. It was only a couple of blocks away, and Ed agreed to take over the store while she was away.

"You can stay here until tomorrow morning when you will leave. I'll be back later, and I suggest you listen to the radio and stay inside for the time being. Do you agree?"

"I certainly do. I'm bushed and really need the rest. Do you have a classical music station I can listen to?"

"The dial is set for that," she smiled, "at least you have good taste in both cats and music."

"I love both."

After Ulsa left the apartment, Telly sat down in a comfortable reading chair and listened to the radio as she requested. He suspected the radio had something to do with surveillance and he didn't want to upset the applecart this late in the game. The old apartment was small, having only one bedroom, a kitchen, bathroom, and living-room, all furnished with beige couches and chairs that appeared to be secondhand. There were a number of shelves stuffed with books and heaps of papers and other items all over the place, much like her store. Telly realized that much of this was for show, and if he were to search through the place, nothing would be found. It was a beautiful cover. Ulsa appeared to be a fat old eccentric who lived in a Bohemian style that afforded her a great deal of flexibility in her activities. Being a funny old witch had its merits.

Ulsa left immediately and didn't return until shortly after eight that evening. The two discussed art, politics, and current affairs and it became apparent she was testing him to make sure he was who he said he was. Then she came out and asked him if they had a mutual friend in the organization.

"If you're referring to our mutual friend with whom you served on the Gale Robel, then the answer is yes."

"The enemy could know that," she toned softly.

"Yes, they could. They know many of our most heavily guarded secrets . . . more than either you or I can guess. I understand they've known about them since the Great Conflagration. But then, when 'they' were here, so were his daughter and my two sisters. Of course, you do know of this, but have never met either them or 'him'."

Ulsa sat back visibly relaxed. "Now that's a riddle known to very few, and you're correct by your last statement."

The two discussed their activities over the past centuries during the remainder of the evening and Ulsa was fascinated by Telly's range of experience and his travels.

"I've spent most of my time in this country," she said a bit wistfully, "and I've been fortunate to have met many native people who've made my job easier. These Americans are an odd assortment of characters, but in the last analysis, they are a bit

better than the rest. At least they have some sense of fair play and justice despite their foolish religions which the black ones are manipulating to the hilt. The enemy is making deep inroads into all of their institutions and it won't be long until they succumb to the beasts. By the way, Telly, did you ever marry?"

"No, I didn't. I've met a number of women I would have considered marrying, but then, none of them seemed ready for my kind . . . at least not any that I've met."

"Well, I've been here for 63 years and, believe it or not, I did marry a native human. He was a truck driver whom I met in Saint Louis back in 1933."

"A truck driver, how did that happen?"

"I worked in a bookstore as a sales clerk, when this oversized lout came in looking for a book on Mack trucks. After that, he kept coming back and rummaging around through the stacks and I suspected he might be a black agent. But then, he wasn't an intellectual by any measure of the word, and finally I challenged him. I tried to be subtle, but he never heard of the word, so I came out and asked him what he was up to."

"And?"

"The poor jerk was in love with me. He said that he would camp in the store until I gave him a chance to date me and go out for a soda with him. Can you believe that? I tried to get rid of him by telling him he was a slob who needed a haircut and some decent clothes. But that didn't work because he came back the next day with a shave and haircut and the most god-awful suit I ever saw. You might think that I'm fat, and I am. But Billy Crutzelheim was a big fat truck driver from Butte, Montana and had a suit on that was at least two sizes too small for him. The poor man didn't have any money for a new suit, so he borrowed it from one of his seedy friends. What could I do? Well, anyway, I went out with the guy and ended up marrying him. He was the kindest and most gentle human being I ever met . . . and out here on the rim at that. Billy was killed out in the Pacific during the war. He didn't want to hurt anyone, but felt it was his duty to fight against the monsters who were murdering innocent people. Now, all I have are memories of that wonderful man."

"He's one reason why we're here, Ulsa," Telly spoke softly with a lump forming in his throat, "the people here are just like everywhere else. They're human like we are, and subject to the

same pitfalls and the same goodness. They don't live very long and have difficulty growing up."

Ulsa agreed, and they discussed some other things before retiring for the evening.

The morning air was cool and there was a threat of rain from an overcast sky. The evening before had been delightful and he really liked Ulsa, although her physical condition bothered him. She was suffering from a serious diabetic condition that would cut her life short, but the problem didn't seem to bother her.

"My body is a local vintage, dear boy," she smiled wearily, "and I'll have to exchange it every 60 or 70 years. Believe it or not, I personally know everybody in our regional Necro-Classic Authority and have no problems with the prospect of dying."

"Still, I wish you were coming home with me," he said.

"No, I have more to do here. I'll probably stay for at least one more life-cycle before it's time for me to leave. More than likely it will be two or three . . . the life spans for these bodies are so short, you know."

They arrived at her bookstore early, just as Ed was unlocking the front door.

"If you want some breakfast, dear boy," she nodded towards the all-night cafe on the corner across the street, "the Coffee Corral over there, isn't too bad."

"You sure you're not hungry?" he asked.

"No. I only have tea in the morning, then a good lunch in the afternoon. Besides, one of my friends, who is a witch in training, will be dropping by on her way to work."

"Another witch, is she one of us?"

"Not quite, but she's brilliant and looks a lot like me. She works downtown for the city. Anyway her first love is cats and books, and I hope she rents this place after I'm gone."

"If she loves cats, she can't be all bad," Telly smiled, petting Graumaulkin.

"I don't want her to meet you, Telly. Not that you're a bad sort, but she's pretty perceptive. She'll be gone by the time you've finished with your breakfast."

"Okay, I'll try the Coffee Corral. See you later."

The Coffee Corral was one of those diners that stayed open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and catered to local business employees and students from the University of Washington, only a

block away. The lunch counter was shaped like a horseshoe with the kitchen located at the east end. Most of the customers sat on high stools along the outside of the counter while the waitress worked inside. There wasn't much room between the stools and the south wall to allow for easy movement on that side and Telly had to squeeze past un-protesting patrons to reach the only unoccupied seat.

"What'll you have, sir?" a little blonde waitress asked cheerfully.

"Just a cup of coffee and a sweet roll."

"Any particular kind of sweet roll?"

"Oh, anything that is big and has lots of frosting on it."

"That, we got."

Moments later she returned with his coffee and a hot pastry with lots of frosting on it.

"Let me know when you want more coffee," she smiled.

"Thanks, I will."

Once he was settled in, Telly began to survey the customers, most of whom were employees of local business establishments, but directly across from him, he noticed three somewhat interesting types. One was a young girl, about 20 years old, with roughly combed hair and a bad complexion. She was eating a large breakfast and studying a volume of Hume, obviously a student. The other two, who were together, were an odd mix. One was slim with a big nose and heavy-lidded blue eyes, about 18 or 19 years old, and talking up a storm. His companion, about 30, was thin and wiry with thick glasses. He was both homely and uninviting in his general appearance, but had a strong animal magnetism Telly knew attracted women like flies.

Telly couldn't help listening to the two men, who were drinking coffee and talking together. The girl sitting next to them was also listening, but attempting to disguise the fact by appearing to be studying her book.

"Look, Bob, I don't care if you like this guy Magnuson. I can't see why we should work for him for nothing."

"Don't worry; there'll be plenty of free booze and a lot of girls working on his campaign. We get paid indirectly and get in on what's happening. I can get to know his people and get us involved by the time you get back. It's the only way to get in on the real money later."

"You didn't mention booze before. Now, that's different. I can go for that."

"And, there are women all over the place."

"You might want to sleep with everything that walks, rolls, or crawls, but I have different ideas on the matter."

"Hey look here, Beetle, you might sleep with women, but I prefer to screw them."

The younger man's face reddened. "That's what I meant."

"Well then, say screw, not sleep."

The two turned their conversation to other subjects, one of which was Korea and their experiences there. It seemed they both served together in the armed forces during the war.

"I take it you two were in the Korean affair?" Telly smiled across at the older man.

"Yes, we just got back."

"So, now you're both civilians again and can get on with your lives, eh?"

"Not quite, Beetle's on leave for 30 days and is going down to good old San Francisco and a life of fun and leisure on an airbase."

"That's a life of fun and leisure?"

"Compared to what we've been doing, it sure is."

"I'll drink to that," Beetle laughed and raised his cup.

The girl smiled behind her napkin and tried to hide the fact she was listening to every word of this inane conversation. Somehow the three seemed to be tied together, and Telly could sense the strong animal attraction from this fellow, Bob, that drew the girl next to him like a magnet; but, then, there was something else about her too. Bob was not only older, but obviously well-educated, and although he didn't say much, it was apparent he knew a great deal. His friend, Beetle, on the other hand, was a young idealist without any real education. But, then, his insights into various subjects belied something just under the surface, both compelling and deep. The girl who remained silent, and only listened, was obviously very bright since she was able to grasp every nuance as her changing expressions gave away her appreciation of the odd conversation.

Later, when Telly thought about the three young people, he realized that one of them was definitely an off-worlder. Yes, he recognized one of them . . . not physically so much as by the feel of someone he'd met long ago . . . not here, but back at the RAD

station, or even before. He knew this person but couldn't quite remember from where or when. Now he wished he'd paid more attention to their eyes rather than the conversation. That was the problem with getting old; he was beginning to enjoy people's company and not paying attention to his real business.

Ulsa recognized the descriptions of all three and nodded as he expressed his suspicions.

"Yes, I know who you're talking about, but you'd never be able to recognize the personality you were feeling by the outward appearance of the body she's occupying. I don't know what her name is, but she is definitely from our sisterhood and is out here in exile, or something like that. She was in here a few days ago and I recognized her immediately, especially the concentric shroud around her gamma-complex; I believe it's a grey-shield. She's an illegal rider in the other person's body, and I can sense her close attachment to the young nephish, or device . . . I don't know whether it's of off-world origin . . . maybe something intended for a Tachalet, or something like that. I suspect, from what I've heard, that she got caught up trying to move in during birth and is trying to form some sort of binary arrangement with the stolen nephish . . . not out of malice, but out of affection and loneliness. Her grey-shield definitely makes her a pariah with our Necro-Classic Authority and she's supposed to have some sort of special handling between life-cycles. But then, I don't know what kind or by whom. I've been careful not to let her get close to me in case there's a conflict I'm not aware of, but my cat, Graumaulkin, was drawn to both her and her host body and liked them both."

"What kind of conflict would that be?"

"I don't know . . . possibly with Council Central or something like that."

Telly left Ulsa's bookstore and walked over to the bus stop on University Way, having left his bags in her apartment for her to dispose of. He wouldn't need them anymore. Ulsa shook his hand and wished him well before he left. Then he parted saying, "Good hunting, Ulsa."

"Yes, and good hunting to you too, Telakin B'Mesziah," she spoke softly, a hint of tears in her eyes.

The trolley bus arrived on schedule and Telly got on, paid his fare, and asked for a transfer. The bus took him to the city center where he got off at Fifth and Stewart. He walked west to First

Avenue and then south to Pike Street where he caught the Fauntleroy bus. He bought a late morning edition of the Seattle P.I., dated April 16, 1953, and was surveying its contents for something of interest. The long war in Korea was still raging, although there was evidence that a truce would be signed within a few months, and everything else was going on as usual. He'd never be able to change matters at this time in history.

The bus drove past beautiful green Lincoln Park and finally arrived at the ferry dock, where Telly disembarked and walked over to the ticket booth near the entrance. There, he bought a one-way ticket to Harper and then made his way along the left-hand side of the dock, on a boarded passenger walk. About a mile offshore, he could see the old Black Ball ferry coming in to off-load her cargo of automobiles and passengers from both Vashon Island and Harper. Ulsa said he'd be met either on the dock or on the ferry by another person who would accompany him to the embarkation site. The only other foot passengers were a group of young adults with bicycles and backpacks. None of them seemed to be interested in a grey-haired old man with a limp.

The old ferry pulled away from the dock and Telly watched, from inside the second-level passenger lounge, as the green tree-lined shore slowly receded into the distance. The shuddering old vessel would make one stop at Vashon Island before continuing on to Harper where he would off-load. Until then, it would be just a matter of waiting for one of the passengers to contact him. The vessel had a full load and was alive with activity as families and friends talked and children scurried around with excited cries and laughter. Otherwise nothing out of the way happened. No contact made him, or her, known to Telly, but then, what was the hurry?

Standing with the cool, damp wind blowing in his face, Telly watched at the forward observation rail as the ferry pulled into the Vashon dock. The large island stretched to the south and was covered by a thick forest of evergreen trees. A narrow paved road wound up the steep hill behind the dock and led into the interior of the island. Only a few vacation houses were strung along the rocky beach, and a long line of passenger cars and commercial trucks waited patiently on the dock for the ferry to unload so they could get on their way.

Telly sensed, rather than saw the grey-skinned man move next to him.

"This is truly a beautiful part of the world, isn't it?" the slim man with a dark hat and overcoat spoke hoarsely.

"Why yes it is," Telly responded, turning to the newcomer who smiled with dark-stained teeth. The man was odd in the sense that his features were plain in a way that one wouldn't take any real notice and remember, and yet quite distinct. "A chameleon," Telly thought to himself, "yes, definitely a chameleon."

"And, I take it you are Jewish?" the man continued.

"Do I look Jewish?" Telly laughed. "I've been mistaken for a Swede or a German before, but never a Jew."

"Ah, but I know you are Jewish and I know you from many years past."

Searching his memory, Telly couldn't place the strange man's features.

"You're mistaken, my friend, but I don't believe we've ever met before."

"I didn't say we'd met. I said I know you from many years past. In fact, it was on the 15th day of Nisson, 5696, when I saw you at the Meeting Extraordinary held by Sarah of Vienna, blessed be her memory. I am her disciple, Albert, and I was present at the meeting as you were. Oh yes, I remember you well even though I was only a young man at the time. I do recognize you because she told me who you were and why you had come to be with us."

"You seem to have me in a corner," Telly spoke cautiously, "and what is it you want?"

"Want? Oui! I'm your contact, Mister Gerry Hartman, or is it Telly? Anyway, our mutual friend, the witch, notified me of your schedule and I'm to escort you to the pickup point."

"I still can't remember ever seeing you," Telly insisted.

"Probably not," Albert smiled, his stained teeth looking rotten. "I was only a boy then, and of course a few things have happened to me since then that have altered my appearance a great deal. I was a student of chemistry at the beginning of the war, and therefore used by the Nazis as a slave laborer in several of their filthy camps. I worked at the I.G. Farben plant, located by Auschwitz, and later was sent to Dachau where I was liberated by the allies. Then I moved to Eretz Israel and worked with many others to free it from the British and to establish our own country. Yes, I've changed

very much, Telakin B'Mesziah. But I have never changed inside. My mentor, blessed be her memory, taught me much about the order of things both here and on high. I envy you that you can leave and I cannot, but that's the way it is."

"Do you have a car?"

"Oh yes, a nice brand new Chevrolet with an automatic transmission, yet. Let's go down and wait in it so we can have some privacy."

The two walked to the ladder well and down to the car deck. Albert's car was a green two-door sedan with a long sloping back and looked as if it were brand new, although it was two or three years old.

"What is it, a 49 or 50?"

"A 50."

"Well, I guess you can say a three year-old-car is still brand new."

"To me, it's brand new."

"You take good care of your car, Albert. Better than most people, I might add."

"That's because I don't do the work," Albert replied. "In fact, I've never driven this car before about an hour ago. You see, we don't want any special devices placed on our vehicles so we can be followed by unwanted intruders. The car directly behind us, with the woman and three kids in it, is our cover vehicle. Her husband is upstairs keeping tabs on our backsides while she is keeping an eye on the car, such a deal, eh?"

Telly was impressed, and the two talked about a number of different subjects, but nothing about Telly himself. Albert was a wealth of information about economics and politics, and enjoyed telling Jewish stories and jokes.

After the ferry docked at Harper, they drove west, along a winding road to Port Orchard, then turned south on the narrow Long Lake Road. After about 20 minutes, they arrived at a small house on the east side of the road and Albert drove the car into an old wooden garage which was open. After they got out of the vehicle, Albert closed the garage doors and the two walked across the two-lane road and into a green pasture where there were a number of cows grazing. Telly noted that their backup car was nowhere in sight.

"We can wait here, my friend, until your people arrive. It won't be long.

Directly to the north, Telly could make out a shiny disc coming directly for them, flying just above and to the west of the narrow road. Oddly, an old Model-A Ford coupe was driving parallel to it almost as if accompanying the low flying craft. Telly didn't recognize the type of vessel and asked what it was.

"It's an Ansharim short-range shuttle-lighter," Albert replied, "that's all I know about it, except that it's big."

As the huge disc drew near and then hovered just above the pasture, the old car pulled to the side of the road across from the garage where Albert's car was hidden. There were two people inside, the driver, who appeared to be a woman in her 60's, and a young, dark-haired girl of about 12. The girl was looking out the passenger window at the hovering disc, while the woman at the steering wheel sat staring straight ahead.

Four figures emerged from the disc and dropped to the soft ground. Two made for Telly and Albert, while the other two walked over to the parked car.

"It's good to meet you, Telakin B'Mesziah of the Nashramh Sisterhood," the dark-haired young man smiled, "I'm Brother Orn-Benloah of the Ansharim and this is my security operative Brother Ando Mineom. And, it's good to see you again, Albert."

The security operative walked over to Telly without a word and raising a crystal glass, looked directly into his right eye, then into his left. Nodding, he stepped away and waved toward the hovering craft saying, "Welcome Brother B'Mesziah."

The four walked over to the old Ford and joined the other two men from the lighter, one of whom was talking to the girl who nodded and was also speaking.

"Is she yours?" he asked Orn.

"No, she's one of yours, although she's passive for the time being," Orn replied. "There are a lot of these passive operatives assigned here by the Nashramh for when the final signal is sounded, then, they'll begin their special tasks. It will be a rough time, and I don't envy them. But then, the Nashramh are a tough bunch when all is said and done."

Telly approached the car, noting that the older woman was in a state of hypnotic stasis, while the girl was only partially so. She looked at him as he approached and tried to smile.

"Good hunting, my little sister," Telly spoke softly, "your time will come soon."

There were tears in her eyes, and she stammered out, "Please take me home with you."

"Not now, my dear," the Ansharim man whispered, "but we will come back for you when it is time."

Once aboard the lighter, Telly was checked at the airlock by another security officer, and then taken inside. He could see the Ford through the viewscreen as it drove along the narrow road and under a cluster of trees. Then the cloaking shield was activated and the ship changed direction and made for outer space. Small blips on the CIC radar screen indicated several military aircraft from Paine Field, to the northeast, had been scrambled and were approaching the area they'd just left. Within minutes, the blue and white planet receded into the distance and the Ansharim recovery lighter made her heading for a point 50,000,000 kilometers distant where her mothership was waiting in the void between the planets.

Chapter 24

Perspective

There are places hidden, wherein we alone may go . . . but, even here there are exceptions. . . .

05:15-22 SHABIN 1625-8N5

Everything in the silent white room was comforting to Rinim's senses as she entered. Closing the door behind her, she moved to a long, stone bench facing a dark mirror. She seated herself next to Batdor Zell, who sat motionless, as if asleep though her eyes were open. On the walls on each side of the mirror stood two closed doors, one leading from where Rinim had just entered, and the other, to another time and place. This was a secret room wherein Rinim sought solitude from mundane affairs and found inner peace.

"I'm glad you asked me to join you, Rinim. We have so much to discuss," Zell spoke without turning. "Ruby and the others will be with us in a moment."

"Thank you for joining me, Batdor. It's time we took account of where we are now, and where we're going. We will be looking at the overall picture, and I've asked Ruby to discuss her view of our operations, starting from the beginning of our sisterhood. I think it's time we put things together and into a proper order."

"It's my understanding we'll be doing just that."

The dark screen in front of them began to stir and Ruby's face appeared behind its deep surface. Her features were superimposed over the images of two others, Onyx and Sapphire. Rinim knew

them well and when one spoke; her features would come to the front and be clearly visible.

"Peace be with you, my sisters," Ruby smiled. "This meeting is long overdue and I hope we will see things more clearly by the time we depart."

"Yes," Rinim answered, "I think things have gotten out of perspective, especially during the past few centuries. We appear to be losing on all fronts and are experiencing internal problems we've never encountered before. I know things aren't as bad as they seem, but it's time we spoke together and brought these concerns into the open."

"I take it you feel the same way, Batdor?" Ruby nodded.

"Yes. I know we haven't lost the war, but I too have been caught up by the sheer volume of activities and find things definitely getting out of focus. It's getting harder to keep a balanced view of matters when we're taking so many losses on such a wide front. I can't point to a single meaningful victory for our side during the past 200 years - or for the past 1,000 years, for that matter. Granted, we've set out on some daring and ambitious raids into enemy-controlled territory, but these are only harassing actions, not strategic victories."

"Batdor speaks truly," Rinim spoke out, "and the almost epidemic desertions of our Women of the Mission, out on the rim, adds to our concern. It distresses me that we've begun a systematic program of bombing civilian populations on enemy-controlled planets while, at the same time, we're losing more than 10,000 colonial-seeded rimworlds to them. Another 136,000 of these colonized worlds are also in danger of being overtaken by the enemy. I fear we'll be forced to carry our attacks against planets we've abandoned once the enemy has secured his bases on them. It's a dark and foreboding picture for me too. We must examine our present posture and decide what direction we really want to go. We must have a clear policy for dealing with both the abandoned rimworlds, once the enemy has secured them, and our increasing numbers of deserters."

"There's no question about the validity of your concerns," Ruby nodded, "but I don't think things are really bad as they seem on the surface. Let's step back and review our history, as Rinim requested me to do. That way we can trace events leading to where

we are now, and then look to the future with this in mind. Do you concur?"

Both Rinim and Batdor nodded in agreement.

The three women discussed preliminary matters first, making sure they agreed on the ground rules for their discussion. It was necessary, according to Ruby, that they briefly review historical benchmarks relating to their organization's growth and experience with the enemy.

"I suspect that once we discover where we really are," Ruby began, "we can develop a reasonable policy for the immediate future. You're both correct about our loss of perspective, at least as far as we've discussed the matter. Now let me talk about parts of our history for a while, and lay the foundation for our decision-making process."

"Then let's begin with Aeden," Batdor suggested.

"Yes, I'll start there. As you both know, I was known as Marah B'Aeden, and am still referred to by the enemy as Scoffing Marah. Four hundred years before founding our sisterhood, I and my younger sister, Tiamat, were commanded by an overwhelming voice from out of the night, to sacrifice ourselves on a pyre atop our sacred altar to the Holy Creator. We were priestesses of Aeden's Sacred Stone of Creation. I balked at this terrible gesture and fled the altar with my brother, Danel. Tiamat remained but faltered in her resolve, so her son, Sargon, leaped into the living flames and became the first sacrifice to Samael."

"Yes, that was the beginning of the end of innocence on Aeden," Rinim murmured.

"I was compelled by an inner-force which I could not understand or control, to remove the Sacred Stone of Creation from its holy vessel and to run for my life. Danel and I wandered in the wilderness for awhile, and then hid in a secret cave for 100 years where we were instructed by whispering voices emanating from the Sacred Stone. After our initial education, the stone changed to a glowing light, dividing itself into a billion sparks, and attached those of its outer cortex to Danel's soul. Those from its inner core, which were somehow different, became a binding force to my soul. Thus we became the bearers of the Sacred Ruby, for our stone was an ethereal ruby. Then, with the whispering voices of ancient beings advising us, we separated and left Aeden forever. After a time of traveling to other worlds, I founded our Nashramh

Sisterhood and Danel founded the Ansharim Brotherhood. I have never seen Danel since leaving Aeden, but still, I have never been out of contact with him, for even a second, for the last half million years."

"This same story is true for me and the 22 other Stone Bearers," Onyx spoke out, her face becoming clearer in the dark glass, "the 11 women, like Ruby, being named after each of their stones. Sapphire and I joined together with Ruby, while our brothers joined with Danel. The others formed into male and female triads as we have, and are operating their own organizations elsewhere. Although our stories differ in some details, let it be known we possess far more knowledge, power, and experience than is understood by anyone outside our inner circle of Stone Bearers. Together, with our multitude of sisters and brothers who came together with us at Samael-Borgdragon, Agboler, and Agtren Estates, we formed a solid core of intellect and wisdom that is both the property and guiding force of our sisterhood. We are not your masters, but your willing and dedicated servants. Our living sisters and brothers along with us, cannot be broken asunder. As we will discuss later, even our deserters, whom we must discover how to deal with, will never be abandoned by us."

"You already know a great deal of this," Ruby continued, "but we will repeat the obvious so new material will fit in without unnecessary explanations. There is no question that our history from the very beginning has been a turbulent one, filled with contradictions and terrible mistakes. We know much more now than we did 500,000 years ago or 500 years ago, for that matter. We are growing while the enemy is not, at least not that we can see. He is very old, experienced and ultra-intelligent, but appears to be static in his internal growth."

"I realize we're growing all the time, Ruby, and we've made huge strides in our technology and organizational growth. We're reaching a point where we can't assimilate the huge numbers of people and technical advancements in an orderly manner."

"As you said, Rinim," Ruby continued, "our technology has grown at a record rate. Our Robel III drive which is undisputed in its capabilities and safety factors is a prime example, but even here, we know little of how it really works . . . or why. With respect to our growing numbers during our first 200,000 years, we didn't have that many people and our methods for training them were

crude at best. We were nothing more than organized pirates parading around with a grand-sounding philosophy. We spoke of noble concepts such as justice, wisdom, and compassion without really understanding what they meant. We're still learning about their meaning now. Despite our technological growth, we've blundered in our dealings with the Ansharim and G.C.C. alike, and have repeated the same mistakes over and over again."

"Yes, but when all is said and done, we've always been good people," Rinim nodded. "Although we were crude and primitive much of the time, we consciously tried to be compassionate, even when we didn't know what the word meant, and we've tried to learn from our mistakes."

"You're right, Rinim. We've always known when we were wrong and accepted responsibility for our misdeeds and failures. When you think about it, our people have been notorious for their bad judgment, treachery to non-sisters, unfair and one-sided methods, and a myriad of other deadly sins. Our first period of growth between ONO and 2N1 was a disaster . . . a time of terrible mistakes and horrible slaughters of our people. It doesn't take much effort to remember Vargo Noyen's blunders at the Comorohe II Embassy back in 6N2, and Gale Robel's violent struggle to grow up. There was that affair with Heline Ness and Ritah Colmon, and the terrible affairs with those poor Ben-Ards. I can think of all sorts of them, Eaun Nuask, Sola Frey, Yan Kestle, Estol Surbin, Claren Demorah, Amol Ossit, and countless others, all Magums now, who violated every ethical and moral tenet of civilized conduct. Our navy has no saints, only tough characters who can fight in the gutter with the best of them."

Ruby recited a litany of failures and gross misdeeds attributed to every part of the Nashramh Navy, emphasizing their relations with G.C.C. and the Ansharim allies. It seemed as if nothing they did was above suspicion, especially when dealing with outsiders. No wonder their allies were gun-shy when the Nashramh proposed joint ventures. No one wanted to be left holding the short end of the stick, as always seemed to be the case.

"Our Women of the Mission have suffered from immaturity and ignorance, if not stupidity at times. They've lost more than one planet to gross mistakes, but despite this, we've learned and grown. In the past we recruited individual sisters and put each through a long process of initiation and training before entrusting

them with any responsibility. Even then, they all made a lot of mistakes, but never deserted or turned traitor. Now we're taking in millions of new girls and putting them into the field before they're adequately trained or tested. It's the sheer volume of new material flooding in on us that makes it appear so bad."

"Understanding this, our new sisters don't seem too bad. Their crimes have a different flavor, but are no less serious than those of our older people." Rinim nodded and smiled.

"Our struggle with the enemy has taught us more about ourselves than him. Our experience at the three vile estates of Borgdragon, Agboler and Agtren were the turning point. Until then, we knew literally nothing about them, since we never captured any of their ships and only viewed their actions, not their thinking process. The real legacy of Borgdragon and the other estates were lessons we learned about ourselves and our humanity. We had time to observe human beings subjected to the ways of Adam Belial, and came to see ourselves in a different light. We grew through this experience and have come to understand what justice and compassion are all about."

"Do you actually mean the enemy is still a mystery to you, even after Borgdragon?" Rinim asked, nodding.

"He was until we captured Meseosargon. Our brief encounter with him taught us more than our half million years of struggle against his Legions of Light did about him. We now know that each Belial is a personality consisting of more than 1,000 parts, and that they came together over a period of 3,000,000 to 4,000,000 years, maybe longer. They are very old and aren't human by any stretch of the imagination, since they operate in the Beriatric, ethereal and temporal planes at the same time. They are so complex that we still barely understand them. We did discover this, though. The Belial is neither a cruel nor vindictive personality as we understand it. He uses cruelty, corruption and vices in others to reach his objectives. He enjoys sensual pleasures more than humans do, and considers women to be instruments of personal pleasure. He sees human beings only as devices to be controlled, not as thinking or feeling entities with individual rights."

"That's been obvious to me for some time," Zell spoke thoughtfully, "but the exact mechanism of his thought process has always been a mystery. I thought his views of us were like our

attitudes towards germs and microbes, something that is part of the natural universe, but far too primitive to worry about. I gather, from what you're saying, it's far more complex."

"Exactly, the entire situation is deeper and more complex than anyone suspected. This is also true of us. We are newer than he is, but not exactly inferior. We have a long way to go before we catch up with him. It will probably take 9,000,000 or 10,000,000 years, but we're on our way."

"Have you discovered where he comes from?" Rinim asked. "I keep getting confusing accounts from our fleet observers about the exact direction his ships come from."

"That's because his Legions of Light come from more than one galaxy, we count six to date. With respect to the other galaxies, we deduce from Sargon's few statements, that they took between 6,000,000 and 10,000,000 years to subdue. From our examination of Meseosargon we learned that he estimated our galaxy would be his in about 10,000,000 years, providing there were no surprises. This invasion is only in its beginning stages as far as he's concerned, and the battle zone for the past 500,000 years is only a toehold constituting eight percent of the rim area. It has now been expanded to 14 percent. His Legions of Light occupy 61,082 planets, according to our latest figures, and he's encroaching on 1,202,600 other planets in the attack zone. In this same area, the G.C.C. has 206,341 rim planets of their 1,456,023 member worlds. There are more than 9,000,000 unexplored planets in the G.C.C. Proctorate zone, not to mention more than 1,000,000,000 planets in the Starset we haven't had a chance to locate, much less visit. How many of these have advanced civilizations, we have no way of guessing. So you see, subverting and then conquering this galaxy isn't something that's done overnight. We have a great deal of time and space in which to maneuver and grow during the course of this invasion. We aren't out of the fight by a long sight."

"It's true that we're not out of the fight, and won't be." Sapphire's face came to the mirror's surface. "Zell is well aware of our command of affairs over the binary planes, although Sargon also has command in this arena. We've been maneuvering with his forces in the ethereal zone from the very beginning, when we first discovered the secret of Necro-Crystals back in (-) 240-0N0. His forces are nearly equal to ours, but because of their differences, they haven't been able to enforce their will on us. In the temporal

arena, they enslave and kill our living representatives, but once the corporeal body is shed, they have little control over the situation. They cannot subjugate anyone's soul, only intimidate and mislead the individual. Even then, a person must work to place his soul at the disposal of the black ones . . . he must do it of his own free will and convince them he's worth accepting. They appear to be only interested in capturing our material galaxy for the time being. Possibly that's all they can actually control."

"What then of the souls they've incarcerated in their black metal, as in Borgdragon's wall and the others?" Rinim asked. "I don't recall anyone volunteering to enter those terrible walls."

"As I said, Sargon can't control your soul, but he can imprison your body. The material from which those walls were made, were in fact a different form of corporeal body that superseded and replaced the murdered one. Thus, the people were pressed into the material and both their bodies and souls were trapped in the black metal. This was true at Shamshoah and other early prisons where he developed his techniques for imprisoning human souls."

"Yes, I remember Sahlie Lor's account of the 'pressing room' at Shamshoah. I understand exactly what you mean, Sapphire."

"You see, Rinim, our real strength is in our corporeal sisters and brothers who serve with loyalty and dedication, life after life-cycle to combat Sargon's invaders. Our Necro-Classic Authority is our binding force, and our means of exercising command over the Ethereal-Temporal Complex. It's the primary force that guides and sustains our people's growth and maturity. Our temporal operations don't work without constant surveillance and direction from our Necro-Classic Organization. It is our best kept secret, even from you, my dear Rinim. Even Batdor Zell, who is privy to many of its secrets, doesn't know them all."

"What? Do you mean that even Batdor doesn't understand exactly how her own organization functions?"

"That's right, Rinim," Zell turned and smiled. "I know what is necessary for me to know, nothing more."

"As you can see, my dear Rinim," Sapphire continued, "none of us is privy to all of our secrets. That's why they remain secrets. Batdor Zell is hereby authorized to share her knowledge with you, but you are never to disclose it to another soul, living or not."

"I understand and agree," Rinim nodded.

"It is no accident that the order of the Ginger and the Rose is a separate organization within our sisterhood, dear Rinim," Sapphire smiled as she spoke. "Actually, the order is divided into two parts as its name implies. The Rose represents our Necro-Classic Authority; the hidden realm of Yetseratic substance with which we govern our far-flung sisterhood. We do this through a web of secret watchers and operatives brought together in our limitless archive; our Well of Souls. This and other secret forces we have at our command, make up the threads of our clandestine network. The Ginger, on the other hand, represents our living order of corporeal sisters and brothers who wear the grey uniform. They represent the vitality and spirit of life incarnate with its cloaked violence ever controlled by the forces of justice and compassion translated into law. They represent our visible organization, but only a small part of it. There are our security sisters who wear the grey-green uniform and, among other things, retrieve those souls lost on alien worlds. We aren't so vulnerable that we can be plucked out of a crowd and brought under Sargon's control. No, we are more than we appear, my dear Rinim. We draw our source of knowledge and basic wisdom from your very roots. And know you this, Rinim Poodor, once you joined together with our sisterhood, you reunited with members of your own supposedly lost race. You were found by your own kind, although you didn't know it."

Rinim smiled and nodded thoughtfully. "I always thought the voices in the Sacred Stones were related to my origins. You need say no more, for I know the truth of the matter."

Ruby's face appeared again as she described how the sisterhood divided into functional sections which overlapped in some areas. Security was divided into two primary orders, which were then divided into six sub-orders according to their functions or special missions. The navy had four sections, while the Women of the Mission had seven. The giant economic and trade monopolies were broken into 15 units each, and were represented on every G.C.C. member world, as well as elsewhere. General administration and personnel interfaced with security, so no one escaped direct supervision by one of its sub-groups. After discussing the growth of their far-flung organization, she turned back to the major breakthroughs which marked their progress on all fronts.

"It seems academic now to outline our six major breakthroughs to you two, but even repeating the obvious sometimes helps place

things in order. Everything started with the voices from the Stones of Creation which marked our birth into this new sisterhood. Once we established ourselves in our first headquarters at Olum-Nor V, we were told the secret of the Necro-Crystal and how to use it. This gave us our first control over the binary planes and made the retrieval of our sisters' souls a reality. Much later, we learned how to unite those souls into binary marriages and with this, we developed a crude form of Beriatric communication within our Necro-Classic Order. Later, we were able to extend our communications from the ethereal to the temporal arena. Believe me, this giant stride made us a permanent structure in the order of things. We could not be destroyed by anything, and this still holds true today. Our third great stride happened by accident, although it was inevitable, when I became the first Magum and learned how it happened. Because of this, we had Beriatric communications through living sisters, along with our Necro-Classic agencies in the ethereal. We were able to move from scattered semi-autonomous councils to our first form of Council Central which resided in the persona of all our Magums."

"Oh, I remember that discovery well," Rinim sighed. "That's when I first met you and Batdor on the Crystal Beam. And I was to become the second Magum in our order. Oh, yes indeed."

"We didn't change much until after we entered Borgdragon wall, and later Agboler and Agtren Estates. We started believing we would capture all the enemy's secrets, but there were few to learn. We learned something far more important for the time; about ourselves. This was our fourth great stride. From this self-knowledge, we found the secret for remaining together as one body of composite souls, and because of this we've changed the entire control structure of our sisterhood. With Sapphire and Onyx joining me, we became the single most powerful agent in this galaxy, aside from beings we may not be aware of yet. But we will address these things later. Suffice it to say, we have become something more than previously existed. We are totally ethereal, but we see, hear, feel, and experience temporal affairs through our more than 500,000 living Magums. In addition to that, we sense quantum impulses through more than 40,000,000 of our security sisters, and can identify any gamma-complex they scan. Of equal importance, we've expanded our attention span to equal our more than 12,000,000 individual souls. With this, we've expanded our

memory and divided our workload at the same time. We are all distinct and individual personalities who, are at the same time, one entity."

"The discovery of the Robel III drive was the fifth," Zell added. "It also opened a new concept in our understanding of the universe, a frightening and wonderful one at that."

"Yes, and we shall speak of that now. Our brief encounter with PARRSOOVOOV lasted only a few seconds, but from this we gained an entirely new concept of time and space. It took us more than 1,000 years to begin to understand the rudiments of that part of reality, and even now we don't know much more. Whatever PARRSOOVOOV was or where she came from is a total mystery to us. We are sure it was she. We may never find out, but time does have a way of revealing the most hidden of things."

"How true," Rinim nodded.

"It was our capture of Meseosargon that brought us to our present stage of development. We learned a great deal about him, as we mentioned before. The most important revelation we acquired from him was that as old and powerful as he is, he isn't the end of the line. He had no idea of who or what PARRSOOVOOV was, although his spies told him of our encounter. This is the real lesson we have to consider when we try to discover where we are. We are here and now, we are only emerging from our infancy and starting to see small pieces of our universe; or reality. Before Samael-Borgdragon and the other black estates, we were primitive children trying to defend ourselves from grown-ups bent on enslaving us. Now we're becoming youths trying to break out of our childhood ignorance and entering into the realm of adult responsibility. Everything appears to be working against us because we haven't learned to see the overall picture. But we are getting glimpses of it and learning that we are much more than we thought. There are realities within realities, and we haven't remotely discovered what reality really is. We know that REALITY is all that there is, and we must learn to understand it as we grow from youths to adults, and then into mature human beings."

"Yes, Ruby, there is a magnificent universe out there, and we have only our eyes and senses to perceive it. I know from experience that there are more senses than these young bodies possess, and in time, we too will develop into mature human beings."

After discussing other insights into their present state of affairs, the three decided to maintain their present course for the time being. Things were bad and would definitely get worse, but they weren't anywhere near being overwhelmed and defeated. Ruby was right, there was a lot more to their sisterhood than anyone realized, and they were here to stay.

Batdor Zell said good-bye and left the room, after kissing Rinim's cheek. Now, after thinking about their short meeting, she rose to her feet and went to the door. Opening the door, she went through and left it open, moving silently along the dim grey tunnel leading back into the temporal world.

Opening her eyes, Rinim blinked and looked around. Everything was nearly the same as when she left, but now she had a new awareness of its temporary nature and an appreciation of what creation was all about.

"Oh, yes," she spoke aloud, "we are only beginning our long journey into eternity . . . and it is such a very long journey."

THE END

POSTSCRIPT

18:00-05 SHABIN 1632-8N5

This, my dear friends and readers, concludes the last of four volumes of our Nashramh Sisterhood's post-Borgdragon history which we call the 'Miriam Project'.

You all know me by my brief appearances in the story, and by my habit of bringing my own libations whenever I encounter someone new. Yes, I am Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor, our Sisterhood's Principal Archivist and the teller of tales, for it is through me that these stories have been related to you.

I'm sure each of you wonders what happened to Miriam, Jenn and the others, since this book seems to have ended in the middle of nowhere. But, if you think about it, we've only taken a pause in our account, and will allow a little time to pass before continuing on with it. After all, we are recounting our history, not future events, for the future has yet to be lived.

Now, let's see. The Qualo-Tae limped back into friendly space and contacted the SF Shushkin-Molu on the fifth day of Maren 1626-8N5, after losing five more crew members while surfacing to temporal space. The Dead Tiller malfunctioned because intense heat in the reactor section baked all of its electronic and light-generating components, making the fiber-optic system inoperable. Jenn nearly ran out of songs for her glee club to sing, and was beginning to improvise when they were finally rescued. Fortunately the fighter-lifeboat's aft whip antenna was free to be extended and they sent out a distress signal that was answered within two weeks. A month later, the SF Shushkin-Molu evacuated everyone from the wrecked craft and destroyed the Qualo-Tae with a nuclear limpet mine. Whereas nine people survived on the Qualo-Tae, only four survived on the Corbol, one being Sister-Magum Miriam B'Mesziah. Arden Ardel is with us now, and has been reunited with

his first, and real mother, Ruby of the Sacred Stone. They are together again for the first time since parting more than 300,000 years ago. Our wonderful young man, Telakin, is resting between assignments and will be active again in the near future. Neftalak B'Mesziah succumbed to the charming wiles of Liesha Court and became her devoted husband . . . not too reluctantly, and is still our willing ally. Neferah has been assigned to commissioning a new scout destroyer named after her lost ship; the Qualo-Tae. She's a tough old cat and will never give up her command, missing arm or not. That's why our navy is so resilient, our rimfleet people don't have any idea of what losing is . . . minor setbacks, yes, but defeats, no.

At this moment in time, we appear to be overwhelmed by enemy successes with the loss of countless worlds and their victim populations. Our trust placed in Meszian elves and other symbiotic races, whom we stationed out on the seventh arm rimworlds, has been a disappointment and we have lost many of them to desertion, and in a few cases, treason. But, all isn't lost. If a Low Elf like Jennanine B'Mesziah can grow from an immature child to a dedicated sister of the Ginger and the Rose in only three life-cycles, we definitely have hope for the others. We are amazed that she has come so far without losing either her sweet temperament or innocence, even though she has experienced the same terrible events that have embittered others over and over again. We have much to learn about elves and the thousands of other racial groups who are filling our ranks. We must be a bit harsh with them when they desert or forget what their mission is, but they are still our sisters and brothers and we won't abandon any of them.

We are all growing and learning to become human, no matter what clothing we wear, for we all wear our humanity differently. There is much more to our universe than we can guess, and it's wonderful to think about how vast and complex our small piece of creation is. Whenever we become despondent over one another, remember that eternity is a lonely prospect without people. Without the warmth of human love and dedication, there is little to look forward to. So we must do everything in our power to bring about a just and compassionate order to our many races and look forward to growing into true human beings.

I close by addressing those of you who have wandered from your charted course and forgotten your promises. We need each

The White Threads

and every one of our sisters and brothers to return to their stations and to do their duty. I invite you, my friend and reader, to look into the mirror of your soul and try to remember who you are. We cannot abandon our task nor wait to be invited to join the common effort, for we can't join what we already belong to, and each of us has our promises to keep.

Peace,



Sister-Magum Rinim Poodor
Archivist

Nashramh Class I Scout Destroyer
600 meters long

